THE EMERALD REALM BOOK THREE

A RETELLING OF
*CINDERELLA*

# FRAMED IN FLORALS

ABIGAIL MANNING

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The Emerald Realm: Framed in Florals

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# prologue

Moonlight streamed in through the tall windows lining the throne room. The king sat regally upon his obsidian throne, a few lit candles keeping his eyes shadowed. Across the elongated room, his eldest son kneeled before his father, his eyes trained on his glistening crown.

"It would seem your brother has taken vast strides toward inheriting the kingdom." King Darius tapped his ringed fingers upon the arm of his throne. Candlelight sparked off the gaudy gems, casting colored flashes of light across the dim ceiling.

Prince Conan merely smiled. "Miron may believe he can take my place, but I assure you, Father, he is weaker than he lets on." The prince remained kneeled, but kept his dark eyes intently trained upon the king.

His father's posture stiffened. "Weak, you say?" The king snarled, "Prince Miron single-handedly removed the Isallan queen from power when she was deemed unfit to rule. Simultaneously, he prevented a marriage alliance from forming between their princess and Prince Jasper of Drancos. Due to his efforts, we remain Isalla's most powerful ally, and their kingdom is now suited to thrive, leaving Drancos dependent on their own resources. So please, enlighten me, son. What about your brother's actions would you deem weak?" His eyes narrowed viciously, daring the prince to challenge him.

"I deem it all as weak." A subtle laugh resonated from the prince. "Miron may have removed Queen Minerva, but he only accomplished it from the shadows. Instead of a clean disposal, the queen was merely banished." A crooked smile spread across his lips. "A true king isn't afraid to get his blade dirty... isn't that right, Father?"

The prince dashed to his feet, drawing the dagger from his side in the same instance. In one fluid motion, he threw the blade where it spiraled in the air across the throne room. The king's gaze never strayed from his son's as the blade landed with a crack, embedding itself into the crest of the stone throne.

"Is that the way you address your king?" his father roared indignantly, never flinching from the dagger looming above his crown.

"That is how a king addresses the weak." The eldest prince projected across the room, kneeling once more and fully lowering his head. "And you, Father, have taught me that a true ruler never neglects an opportunity to prove their strength."

Silence permeated the air for a brief moment before a fraction of a smile twitched the king's mouth. He rose from his seat and slowly approached the kneeling prince. His calm footsteps echoed ominously within the candlelit throne room. He stopped just short of his son. "If you insist on proving your strength, then I will offer you a test."

The prince remained silent, smiling at the polished floor.

"The Drancos kingdom has been a thorn in my side for decades," the king growled, tapping his fingers upon the tip of his embellished scepter. "Due to our involvement in Sybettal's downfall, King Garrett has always been rather limited in his trade agreements toward Ashbourne. I do believe it is time for us to renegotiate those terms..." His shadowed eyes flickered with the fiery glow of the burning candlesticks, "by whatever means necessary." His face maintained a grave starkness as he awaited his son's reply.

Prince Conan chuckled. "Are you requesting that I change the king's mind?" He raised his head slightly, looking into his father's viperous gaze. "Or simply change who is king?"

“Surprise me,” the king replied coldly. “But keep in mind that your actions will be judged. If your results fail to please me, then Miron shall be named my successor.” He turned his focus off the prince, stepping around him and striding toward the door.

The prince bore a prideful smile of triumph as he listened for his father’s exiting footsteps. The shadows of both men danced chaotically against the light of the dwindling flame.

“By all means,” the king called back just before the doors closed behind him. “Prove you’re not afraid to get your blade dirty, son.”

# chapter one

"Eight… nine… ten coins! It's all here, Mr. Pruner." I slid the silver coins proudly across the counter.

"Well, what do you know?" The old man smiled kindly as he collected the last silver piece. "I must say, I'm impressed, Miss Kalina. Never imagined you would sell enough flowers to purchase a fine pair of boots, but I've always enjoyed being proven wrong."

I grinned radiantly. "Always a pleasure to do so. I must admit, it took a few more months than necessary to gain the last two coins. Spring is rough for selling bouquets due to the variety of wildflowers anyone can collect. Summer is my busy season, though! Who knows... you might even see me again for a second pair in the next few weeks!" I tapped on the counter excitedly, causing the cobbler to snicker.

"You certainly have the youthful energy to pull it off." He reached low behind the counter. "But since a second pair may take some time, how bout you try these on for size instead?" He rose, placing a pair of beautiful leather gardening boots in front of me.

My mouth fell agape. "Mr. Pruner... these are incredible. But you never even took my measurements...?" Despite my apprehension, I couldn't help but gently trace the masterful stitching that bound the leather.

The cobbler laughed again. "They should fit. You've tried on enough samples for me to gauge an accurate size. I had faith that you'd come up with the full payment soon enough, so I saved myself the time and crafted these a couple of weeks ago." Ignoring my awestruck expression, he slid the shoes across the counter. "Now, what are ya gawking for? Don't keep an old man waiting. Let me see how they look."

I shook myself out of my astounded daze. "Right, of course!" I took the boots with a grateful nod then seated myself upon the nearest wooden stool.

My bare feet poked unattractively out from under my skirt as I raised my foot. It had been well over five years since I had received a new pair of shoes. Well, new boots, anyway. My stepmother had regularly replaced my house slippers, but only because she didn't want my filthy toes tracking dirt into the house. Or at least, that's how she described it. Although she wasn't hurting for finances, Sapphira had never found me worthy of spending money on. As a matter of fact, more often than not, she used me to make money.

I slipped the boots onto my feet with ease. The fresh scent of new leather brought a widened grin upon my face. I tapped my toes and heels against the wooden plank floor, relishing in the relief that I no longer needed to worry about splinters. Mr. Pruner laughed in equal amusement as I twirled across the shop floor in my new boots. He was right, they fit perfectly.

"They're incredible!" I announced gleefully. "Thank you so much. I promise I'll take excellent care of them." I gave one bonus twirl before stopping. My head continued to spin a little more than I'd intended, but I didn't bear it any mind.

"I'm certain you will, Miss Kalina." The cobbler's eyes gleamed with satisfaction at my joyous reaction to his work. "Now you best start breaking them in. Next time I see those boots, they had better be caked in mud from that flower patch of yours."

"Oh, that's a guarantee!" I joyously tapped the boots on the ground before stepping toward the shop's exit.

I waved a giddy farewell to the sweet gentleman before taking off down the street at a

skipping run. It had been years since I could run across cobblestone. The last pair of boots my father had bought me wore out when I was sixteen. I had been walking into town barefoot for nearly two years now, and the rough stone never allowed anything faster than a canter.

My feet glided across the rocky paths, never once slowing to consider the blisters I would soon have. As my new soles touched the familiar grass of my family home, I finally slowed to a walk. My breaths heaved with every step as my lungs caught up with my excitement.

The Aristi family estate was nothing to be boastful about, but it possessed its own charming appeal. It wasn't overly embellished, nor was it undignified. The aged home's elegant stone walls blended in seamlessly to the flowering green landscape with interlacing vines taking root around the white-washed shutters. The entire estate grounds looked as if it had sprung up from nature itself, and that was what I loved most about it. Sapphira, on the other hand, hated it. My dear stepmother despised the "cottage" look the estate had developed and constantly ordered the groundskeepers to prune back the gardens. She believed that only a well-manicured garden was necessary for a proper home. It was such a shame to clip back glorious blossoms, but at least the cuts made great additions to my bouquets.

As my leaden limbs trudged fully in front of the house, I casually swayed away from the entrance and around to the back garden. I still had a few hours before tea would be served, so there was plenty of time to break in my new shoes. As I made my way around to my favorite flower patch, I was instantly greeted by a row of smiling faces. All three of the groundskeepers lowered their eyes to my dazzling new shoes.

"Whoa! You already got em?!" Chester, the youngest of the group, chimed in first. "I thought it would take at least a week for old-man Pruner to hammer them out." The young lad gawked at the new leather enveloping my feet as I began to giggle.

"It would seem Mr. Pruner had been expecting me, so he had crafted these in advance." I kicked up a shoe to prominently display it atop a tall stone. "What do you think? Aren't they beautiful?" I pointed my toes elegantly, earning a laugh from the group.

Yvette swatted my posing shoe with her glove. "You better not go flaunting those around the mistress." The older woman gave a cautious look around the garden. "You already know she doesn't like you working the grounds. If she catches sight of those boots, you might as well pack your bags."

I rolled my eyes at her paranoia, but simultaneously heeded her warning and lowered my shoe. "She won't kick me out yet. She still has two months to steal from the crown before tossing me aside." I huffed a loose strand of chestnut hair from my eyes. My lengthy braid had come loose during my run, and the wind was beginning to blow it astray.

"Watch your tongue, child!" Beatrice scolded in a hush. Her wrinkled features crinkled further as she scowled. "I detest the mistress's methods too, but it isn't wise to go spoutin' off about her. Ya know she tips the servants extra to keep an eye on you. Most of us ignore her, but a few of the younglings can't help themselves. If ya don't wanna risk losing more than just yer shoes, then I suggest ya quiet down. There are moments where it's good to be brave and others where it's only foolish." She turned her attention back to the rose bush she was pruning, surveying the grounds with her eyes.

"Oh, if only I bore an ounce of shock." I feigned a dramatic swoon and Chester snickered. "Honestly, if that woman paid even a fraction of attention to me, she wouldn't have to waste all the crown's support on spying servants."

The two ladies passed a look of agreement, but remained silent. Sapphira was granted widow's aid from the kingdom when my father died. Drancos allows a regular widow-stipend based on how many children the deceased spouse left behind, so when my father left behind three daughters,

Sapphira received a rather hefty payout. The funds are only provided until the children turn eighteen, in order to support them until they reach adulthood. The last payment for a child's eighteenth birthday is always the largest since it is meant to give them a head start into adulthood. My two stepsisters had already aged out at this point—Odelia was twenty now, and Brielle recently turned nineteen—which meant I was the last official child who could qualify for the crown's support. That was essentially the sole reason I still had a place in this house... well, at least until my birthday in a few weeks. That's when the true challenge began.

I knelt next to the rosebush and inhaled its sweet fragrance. The vibrant pink flowers had bloomed brilliantly this season, and it was a shame to see Beatrice forced to prune them so tightly. I sighed softly as I silently joined the older woman on the ground. She and Yvette had always looked out for me, so I shouldn't be surprised that they were worrying over the little things. Sapphira and her two daughters had never truly seen me as an equal. Even before my father's passing, my stepmother always seemed to place herself on a pedestal only slightly ahead of her two daughters. In the beginning I didn't notice much, but everything changed once Father died. Yvette and Beatrice had helped me through a lot of the grief, and they even helped me keep my father's garden growing to distract myself.

Sapphira, on the other hand, mourned for a far briefer time. She instantly took full control of the finances and secured a tight leash on the staff. She hired a new butler, who seared a fearful respect of the mistress into the remaining servants. He occasionally showed a soft spot for me, but it never came out when under Sapphira's direct orders. Though the gardeners loved me, they still feared my stepmother, so they tried to protect me all the ways they could.

The women continued to chatter about their distaste for the mistress as Chester tossed in the occasional snide remark. As I settled down onto the grass, I found myself missing the feeling of the warm soil beneath my toes. Although my feet were protected, there was a certain comfort that I missed due to having my feet newly bound. Father and I had often strolled through the gardens to waste the days away and tend to our flower patch. My mind always flooded with fond memories when I took in the fresh smell of a budding blossom or the warmth of the sun's kiss on my neck. I couldn't help but relish in the thought of new life springing up as I dug my hands into the garden bed.

I knew I was already late for tea when I heard the distant clock tower chime in town. Despite never caring about my overall existence, Sapphira despised tardiness. I waved a quick farewell to the gardeners before rushing through the back door. The girls never dared to cut through the servant halls, so I didn't fear crashing into them as I ran.

As I passed through the kitchen, I paused at the dining room's threshold to remove my new boots. Per my promise, they were already well-lathered in fresh soil, which had lightly tracked throughout the rear of the house. A few sets of irritated eyes followed my trail, and I muttered a quick apology before stashing the boots behind the door.

Taking a moment to brush rose clippings off my dress, I entered the main part of the house, calmly approaching the tea parlor. When I entered the parlor, six blue eyes instantly grazed over my rugged appearance.

Sapphira sat stiffly in her favorite arm chair, her tea cup daintily held between her delicate fingers. She had dressed more subtle today in a high-necked, cream day dress, which complimented the widow's full-figured frame. Her pale blonde hair was braided tightly against her scalp, tied off in a low bun at her neck. Usually, she preferred to be a bit more flamboyant in dress, even just lounging around the manor.

She gave me an overly polite smile as she placed her tea cup back on the table. "Kalina, how

thoughtful of you to join us."

Odelia and Brielle both sat upon the velvet sofa, their dresses both slightly more ornate. The two blondes eyed me with silent judgment as they watched their mother's icy glare glaze across me.

"My apologies, stepmother." Straightening slightly, I stepped cautiously into the room, then selected a seat distanced from them. All eyes followed me as I lowered into my chair. "I lost track of the hour, please excuse my tardiness." I reached for a teacup, but it was hard to focus away from their glares.

"Oh? Is that right, dear?" Sapphira tapped a long finger against her chin as if pondering my statement. "I suppose it can be rather easy to lose track of time when you're out in the town. Isn't that right, girls?" She smiled sweetly, and I nearly choked on my tea. How did she know I was in town? Her spies must stretch farther than the house.

"Yes, Mother." A malicious twinkle sparked in Odelia's blue eyes as she side-eyed me from atop her teacup.

"I often get distracted in town as well," Brielle added, her smile looking equally mischievous. "Especially if I'm busy shopping." She placed her cup down with the most composed grace as eyes fell knowingly upon me.

I maintained a calm exterior as I sipped from my cup. "That's understandable, Brielle." I gave my stepsister a collected smile. "Considering how much money you require for the upkeep of your purchased-beauty, I wouldn't be surprised if the shops practically called you by name." I clenched the cup's handle a little too tightly as I prepared for the consequence of my outburst. She had it coming, but it was foolish of me to mouth-off in front of Sapphira.

Brielle turned as red as a carnation. "Why, you little dirt frolicker! How dare you chastise me while you're the one spending all our money at the cobbler?!" She balled her hands into fists and pounded them into her lap.

Ah, so there it was… *Our money?* So that's how it was going to be?

"Brielle, that was my own money. I earned it by—"

"Silence," Sapphira quieted me with a single hiss. I knew better than to argue with my stepmother. The last time I attempted to fight against her authority, I found myself confined to my room for a week. She smirked at the sight of my obedience. "First of all, apologize to your sister. There was no need for you to criticize her, and I won't tolerate you disrespecting her." She gracefully gestured toward Brielle, who continued to pout, still half-reddened.

"My apologies Brielle." My throat tightened, not willing to say the words I had to force out. "Please, excuse my lack of understanding regarding your spending needs." I gave her a charming smile, my teeth gritting behind it. She huffed with her dainty nose pointed in the air, but at least Sapphira seemed appeased for now.

"Good." Sapphira directed her frighteningly blue eyes at me. "Now, Kalina, about this purchase you made... I thought we had an understanding that I alone maintain the family's finances?" She batted her lashes sweetly. "You shouldn't be troubling yourself with such peasantry tasks anyway. A young lady should never do her shopping unaccompanied." Her smooth voice held a twinge of irritation as she narrowed her gaze.

I held my composure. "Pardon me, stepmother. I was simply purchasing a necessity." I took a slow breath, knowing that I was entering rocky waters. "As I'm certain you've noticed, I have been forced to walk around barefoot for quite some time now. It only seemed appropriate that a young lady —such as myself—be fitted with proper shoes when she entered town." I took another sip of my tea, not risking a glance at her. Was this what Beatrice meant about finding a good time to be brave?

An audible sigh resounded from the woman. “Oh, Kalina, you spoiled child. You have plenty of slippers for maneuvering around the house. I even had a pair of dancing slippers made for you in case a formal event transpired.” She produced a small servant’s bell from inside her sleeve and gave it a light ring. Milton, the butler, entered swiftly, my new boots cradled in his hands. He snuck me an apologetic look as he passed them to Sapphira. He had never liked Sapphira, and I could tell this betrayal pained him. She dangled the shoes tauntingly from her fingers and I fought to hold my poise. “These… boots you procured are nothing more than a frivolous waste.” Her degrading tone made my breaths heighten.

*Me, frivolous?* I stared longingly at my hard-earned shoes, hoping I could talk my way into keeping them. I lightly bit the inside of my cheek to withhold another uncalculated outburst.

“But, stepmother... do you expect me to enter town wearing house slippers or dancing shoes? That hardly seems proper.” I tilted my head at her with a curious innocence. Surely, she couldn’t deny the fact that house slippers would be considered indecent elsewhere.

Both Odelia and Brielle gazed at their mother with unsatisfied looks, their eyes urging her to retaliate against my claim. I held my breath. Perhaps I had cornered her after all.

She pursed her lips. “I suppose you’re right, Kalina.” Sapphira stood from her chair, each shoe still in one hand. “You cannot wear mere slippers outside the house...” She stood in front of the open parlor window as a light breeze shifted a few blonde strands across her forehead. “In fact, you’ve made it quite clear to me that you shouldn’t go out into town at all.”

My heart lurched. I watched in horror as Sapphira calmly tossed each leather shoe out the open window. I reached out as if to stop her, but the undeniable sound of a splash shattered my ears as each boot landed in the water pump’s basin. My eyes grew wide and threatened to spill tears, but I swallowed them back. She didn’t deserve the satisfaction of knowing she had hurt me.

Odelia and Brielle both laughed wickedly as they watched me scramble toward the window. Sapphira stepped aside, allowing me a full view of my punishment. Both boots had sunken to the bottom of the basin, and if I didn’t dry them off soon, the fresh leather would be completely ruined. Without thinking about anything else, I spun on my heel to race to their rescue, but Sapphira caught me by the ear.

“Hold it there,” she hissed into my strained ear. “If I see you anywhere near that pump for the next week, I will instruct the servants to tear up those weeds you’ve been so obsessed with.”

My chest tightened as I realized she was talking about my flower garden. She wouldn’t...? Would she? Father and I had planted most of those flowers not long before he died, and even a few rosebushes remained from when Mother used to garden. I couldn’t risk losing it.

Swallowing back my pain, I halted my steps and silently returned to my seat. My heart ached at the thought of Mr. Pruner’s hard work stiffening and cracking from the water’s exposure.

Sapphira gave a pleased snake-like smile. “Excellent choice, dear.” She returned to her chair. “Now, who would like more tea?”

# chapter two

Three days of heartache followed as I watched split pieces of leather float to the basin's surface each morning. It had taken me nearly a year to sell enough flowers for those shoes, and now I wasn't even permitted into town to continue sales. After staring at the drowning boots for a pathetically long time, I finally closed the attic window's curtains, in an attempt to stop drawing out the pain further. I lay back onto my narrow spring bed, staring up at the drafty, gabled ceiling.

I had given up my bedroom to Brielle only a few months before Father died. Sapphira had insisted that Brielle and I share a room since Odelia was the oldest and required more privacy. I believe I lasted a full two and a half weeks before deeming the attic a far more appealing option. We had guest rooms, of course, but Sapphira insisted that we have at least two bedrooms reserved for company at all times. Therefore, my only option for space away from my intolerable step-sibling was to take up sanctuary in the rafters. It wasn't all bad, considering it had a pleasant window and even a small fireplace. But it often irked me that both of my stepsisters received lavish bedrooms while I was refused occupancy of a spare chamber.

The distant clock tower chimed twice across the tree line that separated us from the town. I sat up eagerly at the sound. Sapphira and the girls were invited to a garden party at our neighbor's estate. I had also received an invitation, but Sapphira insisted to the hosts that I was far too socially troubled to attend such events—that, and I didn't have shoes.

I wasn't complaining, though. Even before my father's passing, I had never been one for polite company. Well-bred society involved so many rules and requirements that I often didn't possess the ability to find any of it reasonable. Plus, with the whole family gone, I could escape the house for a while.

I listened for the sound of carriage wheels rattling across the pebbly road. Once I was certain the group had departed, I crept down to the lower floor. A few parlor maids cast glances at me as I silently exited out the servants' door, but I paid them no mind. They may be spying on me, but I couldn't spend my life cowering in the attic. As I exited the house, I had to side-step around Milton, who was entering with a fresh basket of dried linen. He paused in front of me, preventing me from moving forward as he eyed my attire. I had donned my plainest dress with loose slacks beneath the skirt—my typical attire for riding when I didn't want anyone to notice. At first I worried he would tattle on me to Sapphira, but instead, he stepped out of my path.

"The servants won't share any of your adventures today," he whispered as I passed. "I'll be certain of it. Go enjoy some time away." He stepped forward, but then paused mid-stride. "And I'm so sorry about your shoes."

My chest constricted from the heartfelt apology. Milton had always been so loyal to Sapphira; I never knew he had a soft spot underneath that statuesque façade. I turned to express that I didn't fault him for his involvement, but he had already disappeared back into the house. My tension released as I dawned a full appreciation for Milton's involvement. He may be loyal to his mistress, but he knew where to draw the line. I could trust that none of the servants would babble if Milton had pressed a warning into them. This meant I was free to enjoy my afternoon without consequence.

With a new spring in my bare-footed step, I strolled over to the stables to mount my favorite mare. My face crinkled in confusion as I scanned the stalls for the sweet horse's snout, but she wasn't here.

"Are you lookin' for Pumpkin, miss?" Corliss, the stable boy, poked out from one of horse

stalls. “She just left with the mistress. I would’ve sent her with Burlap, but she was asleep when they left, and I didn’t have the heart to wake the ole girl.” He stroked the sweet mare’s snout with a caring expression. Corliss was only fifteen, but he possessed more knowledge of horses than most full-grown adults did.

“That’s alright.” I smiled, though I was a tad disappointed I couldn’t ride Pumpkin. “I can take Burlap for a stroll instead. I’m only going to the palace gardens, so it shouldn’t be too vigorous for her.” I crossed the stable to join Corliss in petting the chestnut mare’s nose.

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” Corliss said cheerfully. “Burlap could use some exercise, and it’s a beautiful day to visit the gardens. I’ll saddle her up for you.” The boy smiled brightly as he fetched the saddle, whistling along the way.

It didn’t take long for the chipper young lad to prep Burlap for me. After hoisting myself onto the animal’s back, I bid a warm thank you to the boy before trotting off down the road. Burlap wasn’t quite as fast as Pumpkin, so I wouldn’t be able to spend as much time in the gardens before needing to return home. But it was truly a beautiful day, and a relaxed ride was nothing to be disappointed about after being cooped up for the last three days. The fresh air ran through my hair, freeing chestnut strands from my loose braid. It was so freeing to be outside of the estate. As much as I enjoyed the comfort of my garden, I appreciated the moments I could indulge in the sights of other’s efforts. The palace gardens were an excellent place for such indulgence, and I planned to soak up every moment I could.

When we trotted past the town, I couldn’t help but feel a pang of shame when I saw the cobbler’s shop in the distance. My bare feet lightly brushed across the mare’s bristle coat, each time reminding me of what I had lost. I wasn’t sure I could ever bear to face Mr. Pruner again, not after what had happened to his masterfully crafted shoes. My lungs took in a long sigh, and I shook the guilt from my mind, trying to focus on something more positive. I was determined to be optimistic today, and this outing was the exact medication I required.

The Drancos palace had always been surrounded in the most glorious gardens in the entire realm. Our kingdom had always been notorious for having excellent soil, and we reaped its benefits every season. Drancos gained most of its influence through the trade of our farmer’s bounties, and our flowers had always been the most dazzling in the realm—the palace gardens were a proud showcase of this fact. Most of the inner portion was reserved for the royal family, but the outer ring had always been open to the public. Father and I had spent many summer days taking inspiration from the beautiful landscaping. Even after he was gone, I still found I did my best thinking there.

When I finally arrived at the garden’s edge, I entered my favorite patch of the public section. It was a small corner, bordered by a hedge wall and shallow pond. It was rather deep into the garden, so the hedge marked where the public was no longer allowed to continue. A small bench rested in front of the pond, facing the most beautiful patch of flowers I had ever seen. It never mattered what time of year it was or how much rain the season had granted, this particular area of garden had always been the most vibrant.

I dismounted Burlap and tied her off to a narrow tree. As I approached the bench, my gaze instantly fell on the extravagant blooms—hibiscus, geraniums, daisies, and even lingering spring tulips blossomed out from the soil. Father once told me that a caster worked this part of the garden, which was why even flowers that were out of season would still bloom here. I wasn’t certain if he was correct, but when I took in the variety in front of me, it was hard to imagine otherwise.

As I soaked in the artful piece of nature, my gaze landed on the patch of land beside the blooms. It must have been recently prepped for new seeding because the ground was bare, with only

fertilized mud covering the surface. I sat on the sun-warmed bench as I continued to take in the eye candy. It was here that I had decided I wanted to open my own flower shop. It was rare for women to run their own businesses this close to the capital, and even rarer when you had zero starting funds, but it was my dream. Father had been a merchant, so he often told me stories of exotic gardens and flowers across the kingdom. I wanted to travel and learn about such things so I could bring their beauty to the capital, and display them in my own shop. But first… I needed to work out the finances.

Sapphira could easily toss me onto the streets without a second thought when I turn eighteen in a few weeks. She might get a little backlash from the community for doing so, but she had been preparing for that. Part of the reason she kept me bound to the house was so she could spread rumors about my temperament. I had never heard for certain what lies she spread about me, but I could be sure it was enough to validate my eviction once I reached adulthood. After my birthday, she would collect the final sum of support money from the crown, and I would likely be tossed aside with nothing.

Yvette and Beatrice had both offered their homes to me if the occasion should arise, but I wanted to be able to give instead of only take. My bouquet selling business had been at least somewhat successful over the last year, but ten silver pieces wasn't enough to purchase a shop—nor would I have access to as many flowers when I was cut off from my own garden. I sighed, feeling disheartened as I imagined bidding my beautiful flower patch farewell. Father spent so many hours in that garden with me, teaching me about the different meanings behind their colors and species. I didn't want to leave it in the tender care of my stepfamily.

As I continued to soak in the gorgeous sunshine and the sweet scent of flowers, I decided it was getting a little risky for me to stay out much longer. Brushing off my skirt, I stood from the comfortable bench and took one final perusal of the stunning array of petals. I leaned forward to take in the sweet scent of a lavender sprig when a sudden force collided into my side.

A loud thud resounded in my ears, and I lost my bearings entirely. A strong body had crashed into my side at full force, knocking me off balance. In a brief moment of awareness, I noticed that my fall was directed toward the unsuspecting flowers. In a foolish attempt to spare the blooms from my impact, I shifted my weight toward the right, landing face-first into the fresh patch of mud.

A sickening splat echoed through my mucked ears as I sank into the soft ground. Whoever had collided with me must have been thrown off by my change in direction, because they too landed face-forward in the sludge. I slowly lifted my head out of the ooze, spitting soil from my mouth. I bit back a disgusted shriek long enough to berate the imbecile who had knocked me down, but when I glared at him, he too was busy sputtering out the mud to notice.

As I attempted to rise from the filth, the slick ground sent my bare feet straight out from under me. I instantly slid backward into the mud, but the bumbling stranger tried to catch my arm at the same time. It was a polite gesture, trying to keep me on my feet. Unfortunately, his uncouth abilities continued to fail at making a good impression since he also lost his footing.

Once again, we both slipped back into the mud, this time our backs being fully lathered in the fresh manure fertilizer. My body remained in the warm ooze for a moment, trying to ignore the dignity I had now forever shredded. This time, I sluggishly rose into a sitting position, not even bothering to stand anymore. Mud soaked through my entire outfit, providing me with an unpleasant sensation from my scalp to my toes. When the equally soiled man rose into his own seated stance, he looked wholly unrecognizable as even a person. Mud dripped down his head, covering his eyes and face. I felt a rush of humiliation flood over me as I realized I probably looked equally appalling.

I took a deep, calming breath. "I beg your pardon, sir." The man jolted his eyes toward me. He

was so terribly dirty that I could hardly make out his facial expressions. I could, however, see his eyes, which were frantic with apology. My first instinct was to scold the man for being so careless, but his blue eyes looked so guilty that I couldn't bring myself to do it. It had been an accident, and *I* especially understood how easily mistakes could be made. Yelling at him might make me feel a little better, but would I be any better than my stepfamily if I vented my frustrations at him…? I suppose not.

I folded my hands gently onto my lap. "Might I bother you for a handkerchief?" I asked the man calmly.

He didn't react at first. Instead, he only stared at me, as if awaiting my true reaction. When I didn't offer him one, he blindly patted his breast pocket.

"Uh, yes. Of course, madam." The man never tore his eyes away from me, clearly expecting an outburst at any moment. "I am so terribly sorry. I was in a hurry, and I wasn't paying any attention to where I was going," he babbled frantically as he finally produced a small mud-soaked handkerchief from his jacket. "Oh, it's um. A little…" The linen was clearly soiled, but he held it out anyway, obviously uncertain of what else to do.

I considered refusing the offer, but I had already made the request and he was clearly embarrassed. "Thank you." I accepted the linen with a grateful smile, then lightly dabbed at the thick mud around my eyes.

The man stared at me in wonder as I calmly upheld my composure. Years of living alongside my stepfamily had prepared me for this moment, and I had already promised myself that I would remain positive today. This man was having an equally difficult day, and the least I could do was be a decent human. I handed the handkerchief back to the gentleman, who continued to fixate his blue eyes on me.

"I'm sorry, madam, but are you alright?" He sounded worried as he scanned me for injuries.

"Yes, I'm quite fine," I replied, while crawling out of the mud patch rather ungracefully. The moisture was soaking through my trousers, and I didn't feel compelled to allow it to soak any further.

The man scrambled to his feet as he noticed my attempted escape from the filth. Despite his earlier clumsiness, he managed to remove himself from the sludge far quicker than I did. Once his feet hit solid ground, he held out a hand to me.

"Please, allow me." He continued to eye me curiously as I accepted his outstretched hand. "Are you certain you're alright? Because I do believe I just sent you tumbling into a fresh puddle of mud, completely tarnishing your apparel beyond saving. I must admit, you have every right to be less than fine at this moment." His tone held a mixture of jest and confusion as he attempted to make sense of my casual acceptance of the mess.

"I suppose I do have the right to be upset, but I can't say I possess the energy to throw a proper tantrum," I bantered light-heartedly while simply coming to terms with the misfortune bestowed upon me today. It was just my luck that something like this would happen on my only day of freedom. "You clearly didn't intend to knock me down, and it bears me no benefit to insult you for a simple mistake."

The man tilted his head, still appearing perplexed by me. "I suppose you are correct, but please know I wouldn't punish you for expressing your true feelings. I was clearly at fault, and I deserve to be scolded if you deem it necessary."

This time I was the one who was confused. *Punishment?*

"I do not fear punishment from you." Did this man really think he held some sort of power over me? Even if he was a nobleman, I wasn't afraid of a random, bumbling stranger—Sapphira's terrorizing had numbed me to most other fears at this point. I stood a little straighter to parade my confidence. "And I meant what I said. I don't see any purpose in scolding you if you're already aware

that you were at fault. You apologized earlier and even assisted me. Is there something else you'd like from me, or might I return home to adorn less... sticky attire?" I gestured at my sopping outfit, and the man actually laughed.

"Very well then, please forgive me for stealing your time. I truly am sorry for the inconvenience I have caused you." He smiled apologetically and his blue eyes twinkled in light amusement.

I stared at his eyes for a lingering moment. They were blue, just like Sapphira's, Odelia's, and even Brielle's, yet his eyes looked so different. I couldn't quite put my finger on what separated his eyes from my family's, but it was more than just the exact shade. They didn't hold the same look of pretentiousness that the girls did; his eyes held something far more… real?

Once I realized I had been staring, I snapped back into the reality before me. "I do believe you have apologized twice now. I appreciate the consideration, but I assure you, I am not offended. However, if you wish for me to change my mind on the matter, then I suppose some offense could be arranged if you truly desire it. I'm certain I can muster up some distaste for you in a few more minutes." I gave him a jesting smile. If I wasn't going to scold the man, I could at least tease him a bit before I left. Today was my day off, and fun was a necessity.

A humored grin lit up his face. "Well, we can't have that. Surely a third apology should keep me in your good graces, correct?" Without awaiting my reply, the man trotted around me and gazed into the flower patch. I watched him with intrigue as he meticulously selected a single flower and plucked it from the stem.

A slight smile twitched my lips—his cheesy grin was a bit contagious, especially when he looked so ridiculous covered in mud. "What are you doing?"

"I'm selecting an appropriate offering of my condolences." He turned back to me with a fresh flower pinched between his dirt-lathered fingers. "Will you accept?" He reached the flower out to me, his boyish grin looking entirely childlike now.

I rolled my eyes at his ridiculous attempt at a flirt. What kind of man was attracted to a girl caked in mud? As I looked down at the flower offered, I instantly noticed the specific bloom he had chosen.

"A purple hyacinth?" I gazed at him in fascination as his eyes lit up.

"So you recognize it?" He seemed slightly impressed I had classified it so quickly.

"Of course," I replied, simultaneously accepting the flower from him. "They say a purple hyacinth is a symbol of an apology, or more specifically, the phrase 'I'm sorry.' Therefore, you have successfully completed the trifecta of repentance. Well done." I let out a light laugh as I raised the flower to my nose, enjoying its fresh scent. It was rare that anyone understood the hidden meanings behind flowers, especially a man.

He smiled back at me, and I couldn't help but enjoy the expression. He was far more entertaining company than my family.

As I lowered the flower from my nose, I scanned the flower patch. It only took a moment to spot what I was searching for. Wordlessly, I approached the garden and plucked a fresh daffodil from its stem.

"Thank you." I placed the flower into his hand and he accepted it silently, his eyes trained on the yellow petals. "It was a pleasure speaking with you. I hope to have the honor again someday... but with much cleaner faces."

He laughed at my self-deprecating tease. "I shall wish the same. If you frequent this garden often, then perhaps I shall leave you a message?" He looked to me hopefully, and I smiled as I twirled the

hyacinth between my fingers.

"We shall see..." He grinned again, his wide smile cracking the dirt around his face. Now that the mud was flaking off, he almost looked familiar, but I couldn't be sure. The time had slipped away from me, so I waved a quick farewell. I could feel his eyes follow me even as I returned to Burlap. When I finally mounted the horse, he waved once more as I flicked the reins. We rode off quickly into the town, and I only looked back once at the stranger as we left.

I had spent far too long away, but I didn't regret it. This strange man had perplexed me almost as much as I had perplexed him. Perhaps I should have asked his name…

# chapter three

"Prince Jasper! There you are!"

Despite hearing my name, I continued to keep my eyes trained on the sunny yellow daffodil in my dirt-encrusted fingers. A *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, often used to represent new beginnings, rebirth, or more uncommonly, known to implore an offering of forgiveness. By handing me this flower, she had essentially stated that she accepted my apology and forgave me for my actions. How had she known the meaning behind such a thing? As the distant shouting grew closer, I turned my head just in time to see my father's head advisor, Monty, scrunch up his face in disgust at my putrid appearance.

"Your Highness, what in the realms happened to you!?" the scrawny man shrieked.

I flashed him my most innocent smile as I shrugged. "Oh, you know how it is, Monty. I just can't help but get my hands dirty every once in a while." I laughed whole-heartedly as the advisor continued to circle me with a repulsed look on his face.

"Your Highness, now is hardly the time for such foolishness." Monty cleared throat. "Your father has been expecting you for nearly an hour, and I have been the one trying to convince him that you weren't viciously murdered by swooning debutants."

I lifted a teasing eyebrow. "Swooning debutants?"

"Don't sass me now Jasper. We both know how protective your father can be." He rubbed his forehead fretfully before grabbing me by the arm. "Now come along, there's no time to wash up. You'll just have to explain to the king why you're in such a state."

An amused smile spread across my face as I imagined Father's thoughts upon my current appearance. I knew I was going to be late the moment I snuck out into the gardens for a quick walk—although I hadn't intended to be as late as I was. The warm sunshine had lulled me into a dreamless nap on the stiff bench, and after I awoke, I was so worried about being late that I crashed straight into an unsuspecting maiden. My charms never ceased to fail me around young women.

Sure enough, when we entered the king's office, his reaction did not fail to entertain. I laughed warmly as Father's shocked expression switched into a less than amused eye roll.

"Greetings, Father. Lovely day, isn't it?" I continued to chuckle as he fought off his own smile.

"Hello, Jasper." He pressed his lips into a fine line, clearly battling his desire to laugh. "You're looking rather spectacular today. Have you done something with your hair, my boy?" A soft chuckle rose between his words. He had always been such a softie.

"Why yes, I did. Thank you for noticing." I batted my eyes as I pet my crusty hair with a free hand.

"Oh goodness, son." The king wheezed, fully chortling. "I was set on being stern with you, but how can I when you greet me looking like *that*? Is this your newest attempt at luring a bride?" He wiped a stray tear from his eye as he slowly regained his composure.

"Not exactly…" I ran a hand back through my hair, scratching off some of the mud as I went. "Although, you're correct to assume that a maiden is the main cause of my spectacular appearance." To no surprise, Father's face brightened at the slightest mention of a female.

"Really? What was this maiden's name?" the king asked with newfound enthusiasm.

He had been pressing me to get married ever since I denied a marriage alliance with the princess of Isalla. The princess was beautiful but wouldn't have been happy with me. She was clearly already in love when we met, and she was now married to that man and even expecting their first child. Father never faulted me for opposing the alliance since we weren't in direct need of their resources.

However, I was turning twenty-one next month, and I was the only direct heir to the throne. If I didn't marry soon, the court would start pressuring me relentlessly.

I opened my mouth, but paused when I realized I didn't have the answer. "She never gave her name, but to be fair I never gave my own, either."

Father gave me a fascinated look. "You never gave your name? Are you saying that she didn't recognize you?" He raised a questioning eyebrow, and I gave a sideways smile.

"Can you blame her?" I spread my arms out, displaying my fully sullied form.

"I suppose not." The king laughed again. "At least I know now that you don't possess an allergy to the female species. Now we can begin preparation for the upcoming ball without further worry." His sarcasm was a little more heavily laid than necessary, but I couldn't argue. He knew as well as I did that I had been avoiding a courtship. Marriage wasn't necessarily an unappealing thought, but I had wanted to devote more time to my studies before settling down. Being the only heir to my kingdom imparted a great deal of responsibilities, so I often spent most days locked up in the library, studying as much as I could. It had become a rare occurrence for me to exit the palace, so there hadn't been much time for wooing young ladies—not to mention that the women at court were often a bit too overexcited to befriend the only prince. My handsome face came with a far more handsome crown, which made it difficult to weed out the women who were only interested in marrying into my title.

"Are we certain you want to place me in a ballroom full of dancing women? In case you haven't noticed, this is the result of me encountering a single maiden." I gestured once more at my appearance and the king merely waved it off.

"Even in this state, I have no doubt there will be a line-up of young ladies willing to dance with you. A crown sparkles even under a fine layer of grime." The king snorted through a half-laugh.

"You raise a fine point." I nodded. "Now, is that what you called me here for? To chastise me about my lack of a bride?" I waltzed over to an armchair, but Father gave me a sharp glare. I stopped short of the chair, standing in front of it instead of seating my dirty trousers upon it.

"That, and there's one other issue I needed to discuss with you." The king seated himself behind his desk, an almost mocking smile playing across his lips as he eyed my standing posture. "A messenger from the border arrived this morning with some unsettling news. It would seem a band of merchants were caught passing through the border without any proper documentation. When the guard attempted to question them, they attacked." His voice grew solemn. "Six men were killed, and the merchants broke through into our territory."

I stared at him in slight disbelief for a moment. Drancos didn't have an impeccable military, but we took pride in our border defenses. Our trade was extremely valuable, so we closely documented all merchants and traders who passed our border. Our most highly trained troops protected the border, so these merchants must have been more than mere bandits.

"What part of the border did they cross from?" I questioned coldly.

"The northern portion, at the corner where Sybettal and Ashbourne meet."

I took a moment to digest the information. Sybettal was a wasteland, densely riddled with bandits and criminals. Ashbourne, on the other hand, was a more mysterious land. Their rulers kept to themselves for the most part, but they had been known for violent streaks in the past. Sybettal's downfall, for instance…

My thoughts layered over each other. "Do we have any information about the intruders? Did they have a leader, or any physical descriptions?"

"Only one survivor caught sight of the men outside of their caravan. He described them as tall, clothed head-to-toe in black, with dark features."

That didn't help much since both citizens of Sybettal and Ashbourne possessed those features. "I suppose we will simply have to alert the guard to remain aware of any such travelers. There isn't much we can do with such limited information... aside from postponing the ball, of course." I gave Father a mischievous grin.

"That won't be necessary." Father gave me a scolding glare. "The ball shall commence whether you like it or not. We needn't display any signs of concern to our people when we aren't even sure of the intruders' purpose."

"Very well then." It was time to stop avoiding the inevitable. "I'll attend to the arrangements."

"Wonderful." A kind gleam twinkled in his blue eyes as Father gave me a pleased smile. "I know settling down can be frustrating; however, marriage can be just as inspiring as those books of yours. If you choose the right bride, you won't feel trapped, but you will be challenged to be the best man you can be. Love has a funny way of bringing out our best selves. Your mother certainly aided me in becoming a better king, and I hope your future love will do the same."

I gave him a gentle smile. "Thank you, Father. Unfortunately I believe it will be a tad difficult to form a sincere connection after a single dance." My tone softened as I pondered the challenge ahead of me. Any girl could make herself appear angelic for a single night. How would I know which ones were being genuine?

"You'll know, son." The king's response answered my internal question, and for a moment, I wondered if I had spoken it out loud. "When you find yourself thinking about a woman more often than yourself or you cling to the words she says, that's when you know she's the one."

My fingers twitched around the daffodil still in my grasp. "I think I understand, father."

"Good." He picked up a stack of papers from his desk, then sifted through them. "I'm afraid that's all the paternal advice I have for the day. Now I suggest you bathe before the poor staff is forced to scrub all the upholstery in your path." He side-eyed the chair I almost sat upon, and I laughed.

"Fair enough." I turned to exit. My skin was beginning to itch fiercely from the drying mud and the lingering scent wasn't exactly pleasant. As I left Father's office and made my way to the washroom, I couldn't help but think about the girl I had encountered.

She clearly didn't know who I was, otherwise, she would have likely been the one apologizing instead. Her apparel wasn't that of a true commoner, but she didn't appear as lavishly dressed as a proper noble. She also hadn't worn any shoes, which was probably the most peculiar thing of all. If she maintained any status, she would likely never leave the house without proper apparel. She could be an underpaid servant, but her diction entailed that she had a proper education.

*So, who was she?*

I kicked myself internally for neglecting to ask her name. Now the only chance I had at seeing her again was by lingering around the garden in hopes of crashing into her once more. There was no chance of me sneaking away to the garden before the ball, unless it was for a quick visit. That wouldn't give me much opportunity to run into her. I did mention that I could leave her a message though…

My thoughts rapidly turned as an idea sparked into my mind. After I was thoroughly cleaned, I paused at the desk in my chamber to write up a quick note. Despite being rushed by my servants to attend other matters, I took my time ensuring that my penmanship was clean and proper. It had to be on a small piece of paper for what I had planned, so I couldn't write much, but it should be enough for now. Once I was done, I set the note on my desk, next to the fresh daffodil that now rested in a narrow vase. I smiled broadly down at the note before I turned for the door. Monty was already calling for

me to meet with the event planners, so I didn't have time to place the letter today.

A sly smile crept up my face.

*I'll just have to deliver it tomorrow.*

# chapter four

"Kalina, what in the realms happened to ya!?" Beatrice nearly dropped her basket of grass clippings at the sight of my current state.

"I was visiting the palace gardens and slipped into a patch of mud," I replied rapidly as I scrubbed my face. The only place for me to clean myself was the water pump, so I knew I ran the risk of being spotted here if Sapphira returned early. "Are there any spare rags I can dry off with? I don't have a lot of time..." I gave Beatrice a pleading look, and she put down her basket.

"I'll see what I can find, but ya better keep your eyes on the road, child." She left me with the warning before rushing toward the clotheslines.

I don't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the man I'd encountered. To be honest, we had hardly spoken, but something about the incident had felt personal, as if I should keep it to myself. The idea of keeping secrets was far from foreign to me. I hid things from Sapphira all the time, but hiding things from Beatrice was new.

As I scrubbed at my dirt-crusted hair viciously, the startling sound of carriage wheels sent me upright. My eyes darted toward the incoming carriage, and I instantly abandoned the pump. Although I hadn't been attempting to rescue my boots, I didn't expect Sapphira to believe any of my excuses. As I ran toward the back of the house, Beatrice nearly collided with me while carrying a fresh basket of laundry.

"Whoa there, watch where yer going," the woman panted. She must have been running, too. "Here, there are a few rags to dry off with, and a new change of clothes. Ya can get dressed in the gardener's shed. Chester will keep an eye out for the mistress in the meantime." She thrust the basket into my hands, which I graciously accepted. "Oh, and one more thing, there's a flyer in the basket. I found it on the town notice board this morning and thought ya might want to have a look at it." A small smile adorned the older woman's face, and my curiosity sparked.

*I wonder what the flyer is for? I'll have to read it later.*

"Thank you, Beatrice. I owe you!" I called as I scurried off toward the shed. The dingy space was overfilled with gardening tools and unused flowerpots. I shoved my small frame into a vacant corner, deep enough that I could shut the door. It was rather challenging to get dressed in such a cramped space, but the feeling of clean, dry clothes made it all worth it. Before exiting the shed, I couldn't help but inspect the flyer Beatrice had brought me. The paper had been left folded at the bottom of the basket, so I quickly undid the folds with as much haste as the fragile parchment allowed. My eyes widened as I read the printed ink.

*Temporary Jobs Available*

*In preparation for the anticipated royal wedding, several temporary positions have been made available to the general public. No formal experience required, though some is preferred. Please submit an application letter to the royal housekeeper, Prunella Frank, within the following week. Available positions are posted below.*

*Confectionary bakers*

*Sculptor*

*Candle craftsmen*

*Seamstresses*

*Floral designer*

My breath caught as I read the last position over again. The royal palace was in need of a

floral designer for the prince's wedding!? How incredible would it be if I could secure such a position? It would only be temporary, of course, but I'm certain it would pay well—perhaps even enough to open my own shop. Not to mention, if I worked for the crown, even for a single event, I would gain an instant reputation with the nobility. My heart pounded with new excitement as I burst out of the dusty shed. As thrilling as this new opportunity was, I still had to survive dinner with Sapphira first.

Chester greeted me as soon as I stepped foot onto the grass. "You had better hurry inside." The boy rushed over with a moistened rag. I accepted it kindly and dabbed at the dried mud around my hairline. "The mistress already stepped outside once to look for you. The dinner bell should be sounding any moment now, so you had better hurry." He urgently grabbed my arm and tugged me in the direction of the house. I blindly scrubbed my face and ears with an aggressive force as we quickly approached the rear entrance of the house.

"Thank you, Chester." I passed the used rag back to the boy. "I'll be certain to bring you a sweet roll for breakfast tomorrow." I barely caught sight of the elated grin that spanned the boy's face just as I burst through the back door.

A multitude of eyes fell on me as I weaved past the bustling servants. I couldn't see Milton anywhere, which meant he must already be in the dining room. I hastened my pace and darted through the halls, aiming directly for the dining room. At the same moment I swung open the oak doors, the dinner bell tinkled daintily from Milton's fingers.

Sapphira and the girls were already seated, glaring at me silently as I allowed Milton to pull out my chair. Technically, I had made it in the nick of time, but Sapphira held the ultimate jurisdiction over whether or not my timing was acceptable. I held my breath as I calmly placed my napkin over my lap, keeping my eyes on the table. No words were spoken as the soup course was served, but the girls continuously snuck glances at me throughout the meal, waiting to follow their mother's lead. My attention remained trained on my piping bowl of soup, attempting to enjoy the meal as much as I could before the peace was broken.

Once I finished sipping down the first half of my broth, Sapphira finally spoke up.

"Kalina, dear." She placed her spoon down, then folded her fingers together gracefully. "I don't know how to bring this up without sounding crude, but…" she pursed her lips as her eyes grazed over me scathingly, "you look filthy, dear. Your hair is gritty, your nails are caked with dirt, and there is something horrid stuck in your eyebrows." Her disgusted tone sent a small chorus of snickers through my stepsisters.

I subconsciously reached for my eyebrows, and sure enough, a clump of dried mud remained in the hair. I reached down for my napkin to rub it off, but Sapphira held up a halting hand. ."No, dear, don't ruin the linens." She scrunched her nose in distaste. "In fact, don't touch anything until you've received a proper bath." She touched a hand to her throat for a moment, as if to fight off a gag.

"Mother, she smells awful," Odelia whined dramatically while pinching her nose. "Perhaps she should eat in the servant's hall instead." She shot me a repulsed glare, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

It wasn't that bad; she simply didn't know what soil smelled like.

"Oh, Odelia, that's nonsense," Brielle declared in annoyance. "The servants need to be treated well. We shouldn't toss garbage into their private quarters." She side-eyed me with a narrowed look, and I tightened my grip on my spoon.

Despite my best efforts to remain collected, a bubbling anger began to build up inside me. I cast a glance at Sapphira, wondering if she would request that Brielle reign in her insults, but she

only sipped at her soup.

*Very well then, that's how it was going to be.*

I considered returning her snide remark, but it had been a long day, and I was hungry. Sapphira would always back up her daughters in a fight, and I didn't want to get thrown out of the dining room before the main course. Plus, I was feeling far too ambitious today to be bothered. The new dream of working at the palace had been overwhelming me with joyous excitement all evening. I took a long sip of my soup to calm the remains of my churning frustration. Fortunately, the conversations drifted off my appearance long enough for the roast duck to grace the table. I had only taken my first bite of the flavorful dish when Sapphira decided I hadn't had enough chastising for one evening.

"You know, Kalina," a tart expression spanned her ageless features, "you'll never find a decent husband working the fields. I know I have never been the type to offer maternal advice, but I feel the need to educate you in this matter." She paused a moment to ensure I was paying attention, and I offered a feigned look of intrigue. "You see, dear, you won't have a place in this house forever. Therefore, you'll need to become resourceful. I suppose you're pretty enough to attract maybe a lowly woodcutter or blacksmith. However, you'll need to put a little more effort into your appearance if you want to attract anything other than fleas."

A snide chuckle escaped from Odelia. "Oh, Mother, it's far too late to teach filthy little Lina any lessons on hygiene. The only chance of her marrying up in the world is if she meets a bachelor who lacks a sense of smell."

"It would help if they were blind as well." Brielle snorted unattractively. "Honestly, Mother, you should let her play in the dirt. If she can't find a man to take care of her, she should at least know what roots are safe to eat."

The girls cackled deafeningly at their teases while Sapphira only chewed her food in silence. I would have been content to ignore their childish remarks as usual, but the slight glint of amusement in Sapphira's eyes released my anger.

"I don't need a man to provide for me!" I smacked my hands on the tablecloth, instantly silencing the room. Sapphira slowly turned her attention toward me with a disfavored glare. For a moment, I only choked on air. The piercing blue eyes that pinned me to my seat threatened me to remain quiet, but I had enough of being quiet today.

"I'll support myself." I rose from my chair, feeling far braver than I likely should have. "I'll get a job. Then someday, I can open my own shop and be just as successful as my father was." My words beamed with confidence, but it was instantly shrunken with only two syllables.

Sapphira's graceful features sharpened into an aggravated glower. "What, job?"

My previous boldness dissolved entirely. *What was I thinking?* This was a horrible time to be brave. Bragging to Sapphira was only going to make things more difficult on me. I slowly sank back down into my seat.

"Nothing, stepmother," I answered in a deflated voice. "It was merely a thoughtless dream. Please, pay it no mind." I attempted to return my attention to my plate, but she kept her venomous eyes trained on me.

"Kalina, what is in your pocket?" Her sharp gaze darted to where the flyer lay tucked inside my skirt. My face must have flashed a guilty expression because she instantly narrowed her eyes. "Let me see it. Now." She stretched out her hand to me with her long fingers twitching impatiently.

I considered denying the flyer's existence for a moment, but it was no use. She must have seen the paper poking out of my dress when I stood. Leave it to Sapphira to hone in on even the smallest sign that I might be expressing independence. In a dragged-out motion, I slowly pulled the paper from

my dress and passed it across the table. The instant the paper grazed Sapphira's fingers, she snatched it out of my grasp and unfolded it to read. We all sat quietly for a moment as she scanned over the contents of the flyer. Finally, the silence broke with a twisted laugh.

"*A royal floral designer*?" Sapphira cackled mockingly as she crinkled the paper into a wadded ball. "Oh, Kalina, you need to possess *talent* for those types of jobs. A royal event planner won't consider an applicant who doesn't even own a pair of *shoes*." A fresh round of laughter roared from the woman, and her daughters followed in her lead.

I felt so small. My stepfamily's insults never fazed me when they teased my looks, my apparel, or my time outdoors, but hearing them insult the one thing that I felt passionate about… I was ashamed to admit that it stung.

"Then what's the harm in trying?" My quiet words surprised me as they escaped my lips. "Even if I'm not chosen, there's no shame in striving for the best." I gave a shy shrug as their glares felt far more powerful than they had before.

"Oh, there's plenty of shame to accumulate, my dear," Sapphira spat coldly. "It would be an embarrassment to the family. A dirty, shoeless, seventeen-year-old girl has no place applying for a job at the palace. As a matter of fact, you are forbidden from submitting any form of application to the palace. If I catch wind of you doing so behind my back, I assure you... the consequences will be severe." Her ice-blue eyes seared the warning into me with a commanding authority.

"Yes, stepmother." I sighed solemnly as I lowered my head, feeling unable to take their imprudent glares any longer.

This was my own fault. I had been a fool and shared my one dream with the worst company possible. *What am I going to do now?* If I disobeyed Sapphira, who knows what wrath she would bring down on me. She might lock me up until my birthday, or worse, destroy my flower garden. My heart lurched at the thought. I couldn't let that happen, but I couldn't let her destroy my life, either. This might be my only chance to make a name for myself before Sapphira ruins what little reputation I have left.

"I'm glad to see you come to your senses, dear." Sapphira spoke with a wicked smile. "Things are better this way. You wouldn't be able to handle the responsibility of such an important role, anyway. Your father was the same way. He couldn't handle working with influenza, so he gave up and died on us all. Maybe if you lessen your ambitions early, you'll turn out less weak." Her curled lips parted for a bite of food, and I made a secret wish that she would choke on it.

"My father was not weak," I returned, my voice steel. "He endured being married to *you*."

# chapter five

Two weeks of cleaning the stable, that was my punishment for my dinnertime outburst. This was the second day in which I had been refilling water troughs and shoveling horse manure, but in all honesty, I had expected a far harsher form of discipline. I was quite pleased to find that my punishment at least allowed me to work outside. Corliss wasn't bad company, either; so all-in-all, my outburst had been well worth it. The appalling look on Sapphira's face had certainly been a welcomed form of entertainment. I had nearly gotten my wish when she gagged on the piece of roast duck. I smiled at the memory.

The other benefit to working the stables was that I always knew when the girls were going to be out of the house. For instance, the three of them were going to attend the changing of the guard today. This meant that I could escape to the palace gardens the instant they left. All the bribed staff worked inside the manor, so I could easily sneak out of the stables without fear of being snitched on. Sapphira had actually done me a favor.

As Corliss and I harnessed Pumpkin up to the carriage, I sighed in dismay, feeling a little saddened that I would once again be robbed of my favorite mount. I had helped raise Pumpkin from a colt, and even named her. She had the most vibrant red-brown coat that glistened like a fall squash in the sunlight. It was nice to spend some quality time with her in the stable, but I was disappointed that I could never ride her. Sapphira always insisted on having the young mare pull her carriage instead of the slower, well-aged Burlap. It was just like Sapphira to avoid anything or any creature that would associate her with aging.

Once the carriage was prepared, I hid inside the stable, pretending to be wrapped up in sweeping the stalls. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Brielle and Odelia snicker at my laboring. I directed my gaze toward the floor, attempting to feign a miserable expression. Sapphira boarded the carriage behind her daughters and gave a slight smile at my displeasure.

Their prudish glares didn't faze me, because as soon as the carriage began to roll down the road, I rushed to saddle up Burlap.

"Corliss, is it all right if I take Burlap for a little ride?" I asked without even looking at the boy. My hands were already busy tightening the saddle around the mare's torso.

"Of course, you both could use a little freedom for a bit." The boy laughed as he passed me a knowing look, and I smiled gratefully.

"We won't be gone for long," I replied cheerfully as I continued to prep my mount. "I just want to visit the palace garden for a little bit."

Corliss crossed his arms. "The palace gardens, hmm?" He raised an eyebrow at me. "This wouldn't have anything to do with that job request the mistress forbid you from applying for, would it?"

I remained silent. That wasn't actually the reason I wanted to visit, though it was still in the back of my mind. In reality, I was curious if the mystery mud-man had been serious about leaving me a message. It was unlikely that he remembered or had even been earnest about his intent to do so. However, none of the assumptions sated my curiosity enough to simply let it be. Since I had the opportunity to sneak out again, I might as well inspect the gardens… right?

My silence must have provided Corliss with an assumed answer because he was now grinning mischievously. "Alright then, don't admit it, but know that I'm on your side, Miss Kalina." He walked behind me to grab a mounting block. "I, for one, think it would be incredible if you got a job at the

royal palace. We all know you work hard enough, and your talent with flowers is unmatched. I wouldn't blame you if you submitted an application while staring straight into the mistress's eyes. She could use a good dose of humility if you ask me." The boy laughed as he assisted me onto Burlap's back.

"I couldn't agree with you more." I snorted. "However, I'm trying to withhold my boldness for wiser moments. It's not hard for me to be brave, but I have a terrible habit of using my courage to dig myself into deeper predicaments." I watched with humor as the stable boy opened his mouth in protest, but then closed it in defeat.

"That's fair enough." Corliss chuckled. "You do enjoy stirring up trouble for yourself."

I gripped the reins, and turned my mount to face him. "Someone has to keep things interesting," I countered with a flamboyant flip of my braid. I flicked the reins and Burlap took off out of the stable, Corliss still chuckling behind us.

As we made our way to the gardens, I couldn't help but think about what Corliss had said. Maybe I should submit an application after all? Sapphira had threatened me, sure, but what could she really do? I only had a few more weeks before I was free of her jurisdiction. As long as I didn't flaunt the application in front of her, I should still be able to send it in. The worst thing she could do was lock me in my room until my birthday, but by then, the letter would have already reached the palace, and even Sapphira couldn't get it back. A sly smile crept across my face.

I guess I had two reasons for visiting the garden today.

As we arrived at my favorite spot, I dismounted Burlap and tied her off to the tree. A new joy bounced through my steps as I approached the vibrant patch of flowers. If possible, the blooms seemed even more striking today than they had two days ago. My hungry eyes darted across the feast of natural beauty, only lingering when they caught sight of the remaining mud patch.

It seemed the palace gardeners had smoothed over the destruction the stranger and I had caused. The spot was back to being entirely smooth, and on closer inspection, I could even see a few new seeds implanted in the soil. A tiny twinge of excitement alighted inside of me as I began to theorize what type of seeds they had chosen. It was rather silly to get so giddy over gardening, but I felt no shame in it. After all, I had to look forward to *something*. Sapphira had robbed me of every other joy thus far, so why not stop and enjoy the roses?

My thoughts led me to the stunning, fuchsia roses that budded on the side of the garden. I had a similar rose bush in my own garden, but I had never gotten the colors to be so brilliant. My mind fluttered to life, imagining bouquets that would accent such a flower. Perhaps something with a touch of blue? Or purple? I scanned over the flowers looking for an appropriate match.

As my gaze drifted toward the purple irises, something snagged my attention. Tied beneath the soft violet petals was a folded note, sealed with what appeared to be a muddy thumbprint.

*Could it really be…?*

I untied the simple cord that attached the note to the flower's stem. Sure enough, a thumb impression made of mud replaced the marking for a seal. I giggled softly as I recognized the subtle humor. So, he had left me a message after all, under an iris…

"Of course!" I exclaimed aloud. Burlap gave me a side glance at my unforeseen outburst. I laughed lightly at the creature, then turned my attention back to the note.

He had hidden it in an iris! How had I not noticed it sooner? A flutter of giddiness enveloped me as my fondness for the stranger increased. He must have known that an iris invokes the meaning of "a message." Apparently, his knowledge of botany stretched farther than a hyacinth. With my curiosity piqued, I hastily opened the note.

*To the maiden who had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting me,*

*I do hope this message isn't too cleverly concealed. After I discovered the implication behind your daffodil, I assumed you wouldn't be terribly offended by my attempts at writing you. You seem to be quite knowledgeable about plants. Do you often garden? Or do you simply enjoy studying botany?*

*I must admit, I don't often get to discuss such topics with the company I keep. If you're not already repulsed by my forward nature, I would greatly enjoy sharing such conversations with you. I shall eagerly await your reply.*

*Your freshly-bathed acquaintance*

I scanned the letter far quicker than I should have, so I had to go back and reread most of it. He didn't give his name, but he did leave a clue to his identity this time.

*"I don't often get to discuss such topics with the company I keep."*

That at least eliminates the possibility of him being a gardener or any other servant for that matter. Most working-class citizens don't have restrictions on their conversation topics, but nobility certainly did. Perhaps he was a lord, or the son of a low-ranked noble? I doubted he ranked high enough in court to hold any weighty titles. A man as clumsy and openly expressive as he would likely have been allowed enough freedom in his youth to develop a personality. What if his father was a merchant, like mine had been?

I folded the note and securely tucked it into my pocket. My stepfamily would never approve of me writing to a complete stranger, especially a man of unknown standings. Therefore, it was essential that I write him back. I returned to Burlap and dug through her saddle bags until I acquired a small sheet of parchment and a worn pencil.

The stranger's letter had been written in neat ink and sealed in a proper envelope. Unfortunately, I hadn't come prepared to use proper stationary, so I would have to settle for using what was at my disposal. With my writing utensil in hand, I approached the lone bench and used the seat to brace my writing.

*To the recently cleansed gentleman,*

*I must applaud your inventive letter delivery. It is not often that I get to converse on such obscure topics, either, so I would thoroughly enjoy the company of your penmanship. As for your question...*

I paused, my pencil lingering above the parchment as I considered my next words. If I told him I spent most of my days gardening, he may assume I'm a servant. Though I don't mind to be thought of as lowly, I did wonder if I should avoid giving too many hints to my identity. What would Sapphira do if this gentleman ever sought me out? She would probably burn the gardens to the ground if I ever let anyone believe she treated me as a servant despite it being true. I picked up the pencil, and continued where I left off.

*As for your question, I do dabble in flower gardening. My mother once grew a rose garden alongside my father, so I've taken a liking to the art of nurturing blooms. As for studying botany, I can't say that I have ever had the pleasure. Most of my knowledge comes from lessons my family and close friends have taught me. Do you study much? You certainly appear to possess some level of education. If my questions are ever too personal, you are welcome to refuse them. I shall keep my eyes open for your reply.*

*-Your flower-enthused acquaintance*

I read over my writing a few times before deciding I was satisfied with it. This mystery man was likely no one of importance, yet for some reason, I felt the need to uphold a proper impression. It was

likely an internal desire to reclaim some of my lost dignity after meeting in a mud pit; although, he was in equally terrible standings when we met, so perhaps it wasn't to make up for the embarrassment. My mind wandered back to his piercing blue eyes that had contrasted his filth-glazed features. What business did such a man have with those striking eyes?

I didn't have an envelope of my own, so I decided to repurpose the one the sender had provided me with. Once I tucked the letter safely inside, I pressed my thumb into the freshly sowed mud patch and placed my own print under his. Now came the matter of stashing the letter…

I scanned across the plethora of flowers as my mind rapidly interpreted each plant's implied meaning. Most flowers were meant for conveying romantic feelings, such as saying, "I love you," "you're beautiful," or other matters of the heart. While this stranger may be charming, he certainly didn't have me swooning, therefore, I needed something a little more muted to deliver my message. I suppose I could place it back under the iris… but that wouldn't showcase any of my own knowledge.

*Think, Kalina…*

It was a Canterbury bell that finally caught my attention. It was the most brilliant blue, which is likely why my eyes turned to it since it reminded me of the stranger's eyes. However, the longer I stared at it, the more it tugged at me. *What was the meaning behind this flower again…?* My mind flipped through memories of my father as he explained the sentiment behind every flower I ever asked him about. My memory halted on the warm feeling of Father picking a deep blue Canterbury bell and placing it in my hand.

*"This one has a very unique meaning." Father smiled. "It was once used to scent letters that were returned to the high-ranked parts of the kingdom. Its true meaning is, "Your letter received.'"*

A warm smile spread across my face as I leaned down to smell the beautiful blossom. The recollection of my father's joy filled me with the same childlike excitement that had filled me back then. *Your letter received...* that should do perfectly. I gingerly tied the note to the base of the fragile stem using the same string the stranger had provided. Once my letter was officially prepared, I found myself fixated on the garden again.

There was so much potential here. So many flowers that could be combined into the most beautiful bouquets, suited for the most extravagant of royal weddings. My thoughts lingered back to the warning Sapphira had given me. *Did I dare defy her again? Could she truly do me any further harm at this point?*

I considered my parents' garden. Surely, she would uproot it, but would that cost be worth the potential gain? Was this the right moment to be brave? My fingers lightly brushed against the delicate petals of a pure white daisy. Slowly, I plucked a petal, and then another, and another, each time whispering to myself.

"Do it, don't do it. Do it, don't do it."

As each petal fell slowly to the ground, I tried to avoid looking at how many remained. As the petals dwindled, I thought of Sapphira's control over me, her coldness, and her prevention of me pursuing my dreams. Then I thought of the stranger I had met, a man whose name I didn't even know. He had been fascinated and even impressed by my knowledge. Would others be impressed, too?

As my fingers landed on the last petal, I plucked it in slow motion as I silently mouthed, "Don't."

I stood motionless for a moment, staring at the naked stem. As the idea of giving up settled into my brain, a flash of Sapphira's wicked grin flickered into my mind. If I abandoned the idea of pursuing my dreams, then that was it; she won…

No, I wasn't going to cower. This was my chance to be brave and claim whatever control over my life I still possessed. I plucked the entire stem from the root, and dropped it onto the ground with the

fallen petals. A mischievous smile curled at my lips as I whispered once more, “Do it.”

# chapter six

The low burning campfire flickered weakly against the dark background of the surrounding forest. Shadows of the four men, huddled around its warmth, danced eerily between the trees.

Prince Conan stared grimly into the flames, watching as it burned through the stacked logs. Silence ensued as the men waited patiently for their fifth companion. When the cracking of a twig alerted them to his presence, the group rose to their feet. A medium height man with combed brown and silver hair stepped calmly into their campsite, his eyes trained on the prince.

"Well?" the prince growled. "Did you find a suitable victim?" His dark eyes reflected the impatience in his tone.

"Not only suitable..." the man smiled, "I would say they're rather perfect for the task at hand. They're in desperate need of money and don't have any confidants. I believe they'll play the part we require seamlessly." The other men exchanged pleased glances before turning their attention back to their prince.

"And you're certain they'll follow through?" the prince questioned challengingly. "We can't afford any mistakes. I won't allow any of this to trace back to Ashbourne."

The man smiled, then removed a small scrap of fabric from his vest. "Don't worry, Your Highness." He twirled the fabric around in his fingers. "You can always count on a desperate soul."

A few humored snickers resonated from the surrounding men, and the man smiled to his companions with malicious pride.

"Very well, then." The prince approached the man, snatching the scrap from his fingers. "Begin the preparations. We have a ball to attend…"

*Two Weeks Later…*

"Your Highness."

I turned my attention away from the book that had been hogging my focus. The familiar face of my private messenger stood in the doorway of my personal library. Usually nothing could break me away from my studies, yet there had been a recent exception to that rule…

"Another letter, Marlon?" I tried to hide the enthusiasm in my voice, but it wasn't a convincing act. The stoic expression on the messenger's face gave a slight twinge of amusement from my false composure.

"Indeed, Your Highness." He approached my desk, and placed a simple envelope, sealed with its signature muddy thumbprint, onto the surface.

It had been a few weeks since the flower maiden and I had first collided. Our letters had mainly focused on surface conversation, but there was something deeper to it than that. We truly only talked of flowers and casual topics that would be deemed appropriate for polite company, yet I felt as though we shared a deeper connection. We both seemed to be placed under social restrictions. In my case, I was the crown prince, therefore, my duties to maintain my reputation always lingered. This flower maiden didn't appear to be a member of court, yet she seemed to understand my sentiments. Her letters often alluded to being restrained from living to the fullest or even tethered to her current position, and she wanted to change that. It inspired me how she maintained such a positive outlook. Perhaps that was why I grew so anticipatory about her letters.

"Ah yes, thank you, Marlon." I gave a slight side glance at the letter, attempting to display a lack of interest. "Do you happen to recall where the letter was specifically located?" My eyebrows

raised in polite interest.

"Yes, Your Highness, it was located beneath a yellow rosebush." Marlon answered flatly, but his eyes held suspicious intrigue. "Shall I stop by later to deliver your return?"

"Yes, please. This evening should be a suitable time." I replied calmly, my eyes twitching toward the sealed letter. "I shall summon you when it is prepared. You may be dismissed for now."

The young man gave a respectful bow, then turned to exit without another word. No sooner than he had exited the room had my hands blindly grabbed the letter. *A yellow rose bush?* Roses were known to symbolize many things, but a yellow rose often alluded to friendship. I opened the envelope and grazed my eyes across the neat calligraphy.

*To the man I know, yet have hardly met,*

*You seem to have grown more comfortable in your addresses toward me, yet we still know nothing of each other's true names. Personally, I intend to keep my identity a mystery for the time being for my own unspoken reasons, and I anticipate that you will do the same. However, our companionship seems to have bloomed, much like these yellow roses. I do believe I could consider you a friend, but friends typically know each other's names.*

*Do you suppose we could choose our own names? I'm not quite certain what to call you yet, but I have chosen a suitable alias for myself. How does "Daisy" sound to you? As I'm sure you're aware, a daisy has many meanings, but my reasoning behind choosing this name is due to one specific interpretation.*

*New beginnings.*

*I hope this new friendship is one that you are equally pleased with. I find great joy in receiving your letters and hope to continue exchanging thoughts for as long as you find me entertaining. I hope to hear from you soon, although I must warn you that I may grow slower to reply over the coming weeks. Please know that my delay in response is simply caused by the inconvenience of my family duties. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on my chosen name, and your own as well.*

*-Daisy*

A smile beamed across my face as I chuckled lightly. How charming. She has chosen a name for herself. I read the letter over again. She saw me as a friend now, and as much as that excited me, I felt the desire for more. I appreciated how her chosen name represented new beginnings, because I too felt that our companionship had much more room to grow.

*Wait...? What am I thinking?*

I pressed the letter face-down on the table. The preparations for the upcoming ball must have been clouding my thoughts. I was meant to choose a bride from the noble class, who had been selected to attend, so that must be why my mind was on romance. Daisy, as she calls herself, had been a wonderful distraction, but perhaps she was a little too distracting… I didn't know her name, or her station, or even what she looked like, so there was little chance that she would be selected to attend the ball. Henceforth, she wouldn't be eligible to become queen if she wasn't a lady of status, so there was no use in pursuing her. And besides, she thought of me as a friend, wasn't that enough?

I picked the letter up once more and sighed heavily.

"Goodness, boy."

Startled, I instantly released the letter as my father's laugh filled the quiet space. "This maiden must really be special if she already has you pining for her." The king laughed heartily as he stepped into the library.

I felt an irritating redness creep up my neck. "I was not pining," I retorted firmly. "And what

makes you assume this letter is from a woman?" I held the paper up with a questioning glare. Father had always been one to jump to conclusions, but this time I didn't intend to humor his gamble, even if he was right.

"Son, don't play dumb with me," he said in a knowing huff as he sunk down into an armchair. "Marlon has been running your love notes back and forth from the flower garden for weeks now. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?" He crossed his arms and gave me an amused glare.

I remained silent for a moment, then placed the letter down with a sigh. "It would seem that I need to have a discussion with Marlon about his stealth." I pressed my palm against my forehead, leaning my weight against the desk.

Father chuckled. "Oh, Jasper, you can't hide anything from me under this roof." His aged eyes gleamed cheerfully. "So, who is the young lady? I presume she's the poor girl you tossed into the mud. Have you learned anything about her family?"

My face fell slightly at his question. "Yes, it's the girl from the garden. However, I know nothing of her family other than she has one. At first, I assumed she possessed some level of nobility, but now I'm not certain. She's clearly educated but appears to share most servant knowledge as well. It's likely she won't be in attendance at the ball." I felt no need to hide the disappointment in my tone; Father could always see through me.

"Ah, I see..." he acknowledged while scratching his graying beard. "Well, my boy, it would seem you have a predicament on your hands. If only you had access to the royal invitations…" A sly grin spread across his lips.

"I do, Father." I gave him a curious look. "But only ladies of rank are permitted to be considered for betrothal. If this mystery girl turns out to be a commoner, then I'm merely going to embarrass her in front of polite society." I watched as Father calmly shifted amongst his seat, pondering my words.

"Perhaps she's a commoner, perhaps not, but you want her there, nonetheless," he said with a perceptive smile. "And if I'm honest, I wouldn't mind meeting the young lady myself. She must be stunning if she has managed to turn your stubborn head."

"Well, she looked rather ravishing in a mud bath, but I cannot say much else about her appearance." I smiled at the memory. She may have been utterly filthy, but her kind brown eyes had spoken of an inner beauty that I had already begun to uncover.

"If that's the only time you've ever seen her, then I'm certain she can only get better from there." The king chortled, and I smiled in shared amusement.

"I guess I'll need to acquire an invitation, then." I grinned. With Father's blessing, I would be able to invite Daisy without any reservations. Who knows, perhaps she was already in line to receive an invitation, but if not… "Father? If she attends, and she truly is a commoner, would I be permitted to propose to her?"

We both sat in silence for a moment. My question surprised even myself for a moment. *Would I truly be interested in marrying Daisy? Would she be interested…?* My heart twisted as I recognized how anxiously I awaited Father's response.

"I suppose we will have to cross that bridge if we arrive to it," he finally answered. "I'm not going to deny you a chance at love, son, but the court may need some persuasion. Your mother was from humble means, but times were different back then. I can at least promise that I will do everything I can to help you achieve your happiness, son. And besides, if this young lady is half as charming as you make her out to be, then I don't believe we'll meet much resistance."

"Those are odds I can work with." With a new excitement flooding me, I eagerly pulled out a quill and a blank letter. As my hand cascaded ink across the fresh page, I couldn't help but feel a

bundle of tension wind tight within me. *Would she even want to attend the ball? What if she couldn't afford a gown? If she truly believed us to be friends, would inviting her to a match-making ball scare her off?* The questions tumbled through my mind like an equation I needed to untangle. For a moment, I considered searching for a textbook that would alleviate some of my questions, but then I remembered that no book in the world could fully interpret a woman. My fretful thoughts must have wandered into my expression because Father began to laugh again.

"You've got it bad," he teased. "Relax, Jasper. If she wants to come, she will. If she doesn't… well, there will be an entire ballroom full of young ladies whom you can choose from. I honestly couldn't care less about which one you choose, as long as there's a wedding happening by the end of next month…" He stood from his chair, fatherly warmth glowing in his eyes. "And, of course, as long as you're happy." He turned, and left the library without another word, leaving me to my whirling thoughts.

An eased calm settled over my mind as my father's words sank in. *Everything will be fine.* I was fortunate enough to have a father who didn't force me into the most convenient alliance—if that had been the case, I would have married the princess of Isalla two years ago. Father had married for love at my age, and my mother, the late Queen Ava, —despite being from humble upbringings—had been adored by the people. If Daisy was truly a commoner, then perhaps the people would accept her as well?

I shook my head, straightening my wandering mind. I was getting far too ahead of myself. True, I had interest in the girl, but I wasn't prepared to offer her a proposal. She still had to accept the invitation to the ball… and I still had to send her one…

My eyes cast downward to the unfinished letter before me.

I suppose this was step-one. Step-one of our new beginnings.

# chapter seven

"Oh, Kalina, it's perfect!" Yvette praised energetically as she inspected my sample arrangement. "You'll be a shoo-in for that palace job. I don't think I've ever seen such a remarkable talent."

I blushed slightly at the older woman's flattery. "Thank you, but it's not perfect yet… I still feel as though it's missing something, but I can't put my finger on what." I turned the miniature bouquet around in my hand probably a dozen times, closely viewing each individual element. The summer sun illuminated each petal's curve and vivid color in perfect detail, yet I still felt the need to look closer.

Yvette and Beatrice shared an amused expression, then Beatrice smiled sweetly in my direction. "Yer just fretting too much. It looks beautiful as it is."

The three of us sat clustered on a rickety wooden bench in the center of my garden, with me sandwiched in the center of them. Once I had been freed of my stable-cleaning sentence, I had instantly resumed spending my days in the garden. It had been rather difficult to collect the necessary flowers for my sample bouquet during my punishment, since the stable was on the opposite side of the property from my garden. Each chance I received, I snuck away to pick and dry flowers—and, of course, visit the palace gardens. As far as Beatrice and Yvette knew, my palace visits were simply for inspiration… but there had been *other* reasons as well.

"Ey! Is that the final product?" Chester popped around the edge of a pink rose bush with a freshly filled watering can splashing over on his hand. "Lemme see!" He crammed onto the bench between Beatrice and me, nearly shoving the older woman onto the grass. The bench creaked from the added weight, but still managed to hold all four of us.

"What do you think, Chester? Do you sense it's lacking anything?" I watched the boy's eyes narrow onto the cluster of dried blooms.

The sample bouquet was not a listed requirement for submitting an application, yet I felt as though including one would give me an edge over the other applicants. The arrangement itself had to be no bigger than my hand to fit inside a sealed letter. It also had to be pressed flat and dried in order for the flowers to look attractive, even if the letter sat unopened for days. It took a bit of trial and error, but after a few attempts, I decided to create a miniature arrangement centered around a single stargazer lily. Pink pigments streaked from the center of the lily's white petals, accenting the pressed mini pastel-pink peonies that circled it. Tufts of dark green rose leaves filled in the voided space between the blooms, with a few white rosebuds tucked amongst them. At the base of the arrangement, a silver satin ribbon tied off the stems, with a delicate purple forget-me-not pinned to the center of the bow. The color had faded during the drying process, but any trained gardener could imagine what the blooms had looked like during their life. I had been pressing the arrangement between heavy books for the last three days, and now the day had finally come to mail in the application.

Chester raised an eyebrow, then snapped his fingers. "Baby's breath!" he said triumphantly. "You need a touch more of white to tie in the lily. The flowers should be small enough that you won't have to flatten them beforehand."

I stared at him in amazement. "That's brilliant, Chester!" I praised the boy generously as I stood from the creaking bench. I whirled around the garden in search of the flower but came up short after a full lap. "Where is the baby's breath? I thought we had a patch growing near the zinnias?" I looked at the three gardeners, and they all shared the same solemn look.

"We had to tear them out." Yvette sighed sadly. "The mistress believed they looked more like weeds than flowers."

My heart sank. *Weeds?* My mother loved those dainty white flowers. She used to always pick sprigs of it to braid into my hair when I was small. The blooms may not have been large or flashy, but they held simplistic elegance. *How could Sapphira request the destruction of such a beautiful work of nature?* My face fell, and the trio looked up at me in sympathy.

"Ya know what…" Beatrice stood from the bench, bracing a hand upon my shoulder as she did so. "Why don't ya run over to the palace garden and borrow some of theirs? I'm sure they won't miss such a small sprig. If ya leave now, ya should have plenty of time to get back before the courier arrives for the application."

My spirits lifted instantly at the thought of returning to the palace gardens, but then a pang of reality swept over me. "I can't go now. Sapphira is home. She won't sit idly by as I race down the road on a horse." I tried to mask the heavy disappointment in my voice with a puny smile. "It's alright though... The sample still looks lovely as it is."

The faces around me didn't reflect my attempt at a positive outlook. Chester in particular, looked a little more unpleased than the rest of the group as he pressed a thoughtful finger to his chin.

"What if… you didn't take a horse?" he considered aloud. "It's only a ten-minute ride to the palace, so it couldn't be more than 'alf an hour to walk. I reckon you'd still have plenty of time to make it back, and you could sneak out through the back of the garden. Bea, Yve, and I can cover for you if the mistress comes callin'."

My gaze passed among them as they nodded in agreement with Chester's plan. I turned my head toward the sky, to gage the time of day. It was just past midday, and the courier would arrive before supper. There was time, but did I want to risk it?

"There are times where it's good to be brave, dear." Beatrice said with a wink. "We got ya covered, but ya better hurry."

My fears vanished with Beatrice's encouragement. "Alright! I'll be back soon!" I waved a quick farewell as I cradled the incomplete sample against my chest.

It took a little effort to cut through the back of the garden, but once I had freed my cotton skirt from the last bramble, I took off at full speed. My heart raced with adrenaline as I hurried across the coarse road. My bare feet stung from the loose pebbles that littered the street, but I paid it no mind. This was the most defiant I had ever been. Sapphira would likely ship me off to Sybettal if she ever caught wind of what I had done. But it didn't matter if she caught me now. The pieces were already in place, and the letter was prepared. All I had to do now was finish the sample, seal it in the envelope, and hand it to the courier. I may even hand it over in front of Sapphira herself! She would probably faint with rage if I did so. I smiled villainously at the thought.

It was about time she got a dose of her own medicine. She has been pulling the strings for so long that she likely never assumed anyone else would attempt to express free will. My legs strained from the exertion of my run, and my feet ached from the rough contact. I slowed my run to a canter, huffing as I did so. Despite my quick start, it was still a long walk to the palace. The roads grew more populated the farther I got into town, and a new question now lingered in my mind…

*Could my garden correspondent be among these faces?*

I scanned over all the young men I passed, each time I mentally sized up their stature to the man I had only seen slathered in mud. Most of the gentlemen were too short, too tall, or too wide, and the few that did match had the wrong eyes. In fact, no one seemed to match the blue eyes the man had possessed. There were other blue-eyed men in Drancos, of course, but they didn't have the same intensity. I likely would have suspected that our entire exchange had been nothing more than a lucid dream, but his letters were just as real as my memories of him.

I felt my heart rate elevate at the thought of the letters. *Will there be a new one today?* I had never had a writing companion before, so I wondered if my excitement was typical of such friendships. We had only been writing each other for two weeks now, and I had anticipated being unable to respond as often once I was released from stable duty. Despite how short a time we'd communicated, I still felt comfortable expressing my true self to him. Considering his clean handwriting and perfect grammar, he was likely a noble, but he often thought whimsically. It was odd to find anyone of high-status who possessed even an ounce of individuality. Perhaps he was unpopular?

His social standing didn't matter to me. I rather enjoyed his boyish wit, paired with his well-educated discussions. Talking with him reminded me of how conversations with Father would often go. He would always encourage my creativity while simultaneously challenging my intellect. *I wonder if the mystery man has fond memories with his father, too.* Perhaps I shall ask him in my next letter.

It took me at least a half-hour to finally reach the garden. A few new abrasions graced my soles, but the discomfort melted away as my gaze landed upon a full bush of white baby's breath. I instantly gravitated toward the thick bush and began inspecting it for the perfect sprig. After holding up my pressed bouquet to a multitude of bunches, I finally selected two elegant stems of flowers to gently pluck. With tender care, I slid the cut stems into the hold of the satin ribbon, attaching it to the bouquet.

My eyes brightened. "It's perfect," I breathed quietly. After weeks of arranging, rearranging, and even scrapping a few designs entirely, I finally felt as though my ambitions were represented in a physical form.

With my sample perfected, I turned my attention back to the garden. It had become a bit of a scavenger hunt to locate the mystery man's letters. We had both grown accustomed to assigning secondary meanings to our notes based on the symbolism of the flower it lay beside. It was like speaking a language that no one else knew, and I rather enjoyed it. My last letter had been placed in the yellow roses to symbolize friendship, so I looked near other flowers that would convey a similar meaning. However, my search came up empty. A feeling of unease washed over me as I exhausted checking the last bloom of friendship. *Had he not accepted my invitation to move beyond acquaintances? Maybe I had been too forward…*

My heart sank a little at the thought as I continued to search the garden. A new worry began to cloud my mind as I recognized how much time I had spent on my search. I quickened my pace and began to nearly race around the grounds. *Had he simply not had a chance to respond yet?* I might have been wasting my time looking.

I had nearly given up on locating a letter when a vivid, magenta zinnia caught my attention. A look of confusion spanned my face as my eyes landed on the neatly sealed envelope at the base of the flower.

A zinnia? Didn't those symbolize… lasting affection?

I cocked my head to one side as I curled my fingers around the note. *What else did a zinnia mean? Goodness? Remembrance? Aha! It also meant friendship! But typically, it was a blue zinnia that invoked such a meaning… I can't quite recall what magenta implies.*

With my puzzled expression deepening, I quickly tore open the note in search of any further clues.

*Daisy,*

*I would be most honored to have a friend like you by my side. Speaking of… Do you*

*think it's about time we made a second attempt at our first introduction? I must admit, ever since we first met, I have been curious whether or not your hair color was truly a mud-brown, or if you've been hiding blue locks all along. Would you be willing to end the mystery for me, and meet me at the prince's ball? I was fortunate enough to acquire an extra invitation, in case you weren't intending on receiving one. I understand that I am asking a great deal from you, so please don't feel inclined to amuse me if you're not comfortable. However… I hope you do come, and if you do, you can find me by looking for the man with the magenta zinnia pinned to his jacket. I doubt any other gentlemen will choose such an accessory, so I shouldn't be too difficult to locate. If you come, I'll tell you the true meaning behind the flower. That is, of course, if you don't already know it… I greatly look forward to your response.*

*Sincerely,*
*Your still-unnamed garden friend*

I stared in bewilderment at the elegant, royal invitation tucked behind the letter. My fingers traced over the ornate lettering in disbelief. *The royal ball? How did he manage to acquire such an invitation?* My thoughts tumbled over one another as I recalled our first meeting. *He had been running in the direction of the palace… Is it possible he works for the crown?* My eyes widened. Just how important was this man if he could send out royal invitations to whomever he pleased? He must have been a royal courtier, or the son of an ambassador, or even a young advisor. He could have even been a close friend to the prince. *Oh goodness… What have I gotten myself wrapped up in now?*

As I continued to ponder, the local church bells chimed, signaling five o' clock. My pulse quickened as I realized I only had thirty minutes to return home, attach my sample to the application, and hand it to the courier. Without further thought, I hiked up my soil-stained skirt and took off at a run.

I didn't have time to catch my breath this trip. I could only push forward. If I missed my opportunity to submit my sample, then my chance at a new start would be officially ruined. My dire thoughts motivated me to move faster, not caring about my stinging feet. Each time I felt my energy falter, I simply pictured a life where Sapphira had won, where she had taken everything my father had left for me and shoved me onto the streets. The image was more than enough inspiration to ignore the momentary discomfort. I couldn't let Sapphira have her way. I was going to prove that I could earn my own worth, and that it wasn't determined by the scraps of sympathy she offered me.

I celebrated internally once my aching feet touched the soft grass of my garden. *It couldn't have been thirty minutes, could it?* Not willing to risk being wrong, I continued my quick pace across the garden, sprinting straight past a confused Yvette. As I raced into the back of the house, I instantly directed my course to the attic where I had last left the application. When my hand touched on the upper room's door handle, a distant noise drew my attention.

"Ah, Sir Sonnet, please do come in. Allow me to see if I have any deliveries for you today." Sapphira's sickly-sweet voice stung my ears.

The courier had arrived.

I burst into my room and headed straight for my desk, but as I scanned the top of the tattered surface, my application was nowhere to be seen. My lungs heaved heavily in both exhaustion and panic. *I had left it right here! Did I move it before I left?* My gaze darted across the room in horror. I couldn't see the document anywhere. I was about to start tearing the room apart when another string of dialogue drew my ears.

“Here you are, sir,” Sapphira projected a little louder than necessary for a doorway conversation. “This letter, here, is for the royal palace. My dear daughter is applying for a position there. Isn’t that exciting?”

My limbs stiffened, unable to act on the words I had overheard. *Sapphira had found my letter… and she was sending it?* Something wasn’t right. Sapphira had explicitly told me not to pursue the job, so why send it herself? My confusion held me in place long enough that I heard the front door close. Shaking off my shock, I hurried back down the stairs and found Sapphira and my stepsisters, all standing poised in the entry room.

“Ah, there you are, Kalina.” Sapphira smiled pleasantly. “We were hoping you’d arrive home in time to see your special letter be sent off.” She cast a sideways glance at her daughters, who both were biting their lips in some sort of anticipation.

“Stepmother…” I started, “I didn’t think you wanted me to apply for the job.” I watched with growing worry as her eyes brightened.

“Oh, I didn’t, dear,” she said calmly. “It was rather childish of you to go behind my back, don’t you think, girls?”

“Absolutely, Mother,” Brielle agreed firmly, biting back a snicker.

“Deplorable, if you ask me.” Odelia giggled.

“Precisely,” Sapphira agreed, a little more ice seeping into her tone. “Which is why you have received a childish punishment as a consequence.”

My breath caught, my heart racing in fear. “W-what did you do?”

“We did what you wanted, dear.” Sapphira’s lips twisted up in a venomous smile. “We submitted an application for you, though we may have changed a few things…” She slipped two pieces of folded parchment from her pocket and walked them over to me. “Here’s the one you made... I figured you could keep it as a reminder of why you shouldn’t defy those above you.” She slipped me an icy glare as she handed me the second paper. “And this one is a perfect copy of the application that was just given to the courier. You can thank your sisters for their hard work. They didn’t want to leave out a single one of your *special* skills.”

I accepted the paper with a horrified look, too afraid to read the contents it held. My stepsisters lost their composure and roared with laughter at my petrified state.

Brielle cackled. “Good luck ever getting a job now, little sister.”

# chapter eight

I must have cried for hours. There was no hope of getting a job now, anywhere. I had only managed to read through a quarter of what my stepsisters had written before shoving it aside. The only two words they spelled correctly were my name—*Kalina Aristi, Flour Desiner*—and it only got worse from there. My special skills had included growing thorny weeds, occasionally being punctual, and only arguing when necessary. The worst part of it all was the notation at the bottom.

*I, Kalina Aristi, wud also like to menshin that I wish to worc in the palacce for the soul reeson of heckling the royal familee. Prince Jasper is a lack-luster buffoun with a horid taste in womenn, and the king is a bummbling morron with no cense of dignity. I feal as tho a harsher pressence amongst the staf wud help impruv their self-value to a moar realistic standing. Thank yu for yur considooration, I looc forward to heering from yu suun.*

The entire application was so terrible, it would have been laughable, which truly only made it worse. Whoever reviewed this letter would likely believe I had submitted it as a prank, and because it held my true name, the noble class would publicly shame for it. Another tear slipped down my cheek as I imagined the ridicule. I didn't care much about my reputation among the higher classes, but without their support, I could never run a successful business. My dream of having a flower shop was officially shattered.

As I dried my swollen eyes against my pillow, I thought back to the letter I had received from the garden. The sender was clearly from a high-ranking family, otherwise he would have never had access to a royal invitation. Once news spread about my "prank" toward the crown, he would likely shun me with the rest. He couldn't find out who I was—it was the only way I could keep him as a friend. I pulled out the royal invitation from under my mattress, where I had stored it with the other notes. My eyes lingered on the beautiful print. The ball was tomorrow night, and Sapphira and the girls had already chosen their dresses. They hadn't received invitations, but the merchant families often received their updates from the palace last. I was likely to receive one as well... not that I could go now.

It would probably take a few days for the application letters to be reviewed, so I still had a little bit of time before I had to hide from polite society for good. And then there was my birthday… It was only five days away, and my options had run dry. *What was Sapphira going to do with me once I turned eighteen?* Before I could concoct anymore terrifying scenarios, the bell for afternoon tea chimed. I hadn't been paying attention to the hour, so I was certainly late this time, but I honestly didn't care. My heart was heavy enough as it was, and Sapphira's whip could only sting for so long before I went numb.

Before heading down, I made a meager attempt to straighten the lopsided bun I had balled my chestnut hair into. My light gray dress was wrinkled beyond saving from my endless hours of wallowing in bed, so I didn't even attempt to smooth it. When I finally graced the parlor with my frumpy presence, Brielle nearly spit out her tea.

"For the love of the realms, Kalina, don't you ever bathe?" she half-scolded, half-laughed. "It's no wonder Mother chooses to spare the public from your presence. She's been doing the whole city a favor all along."

I took my usual seat without providing any satisfactory reaction to Brielle's taunts. They only cared to get a rise out of me, and I wasn't in the mood to entertain them. Wordlessly, I poured my cup of tea, loaded it with sugar, and then picked out a few biscuits to adorn my plate. Munching the sweet

treats helped ease my sorrows in the slightest amount. It may have even been a pleasant hour if Sapphira hadn't decided to open her mouth.

"Oh, girls, I nearly forgot. I have some exciting news to share with you." She placed her teacup down with an elegant flourish before reaching for a stack of letters on her side table. She casually fingered through the envelopes until she selected a grandly embellished letter with a royal seal broken on the front. "It would seem our family has been invited to Prince Jasper's betrothal ball. The prince will be expected to choose a bride at this event, so only ladies of noble status or higher have been selected to attend. It's a good thing we prepared for this, right, girls? Your dresses will be stunning tomorrow evening."

Brielle and Odelia both lit up with excitement while I dumped another spoonful of sugar into my tea.

"I hope I get a chance to dance with the prince!" Odelia beamed. "We would be so perfect together! Both of us have the perfect blonde hair and blue eyes. I just know the kingdom would adore us as a royal couple!" In the midst of Odelia's fantasizing, Brielle rolled her eyes with an audible groan.

"I have the same hair and eyes, you dunce, and so do half the girls in the kingdom," Brielle snorted. "You'll need to be a little more exotic to catch the prince's eye, which is precisely why I chose an imported dress from Isalla. I doubt any of the other girls will be bold enough to wear such high-end fashion."

Odelia laughed. "You fool, the prince already refused a betrothal with the Isallan princess, and she's far prettier than *you*. What makes you think he'd still have any interest in Isallan fashion now, hmm?"

Brielle threw a cushion at her sister, and the two began to bicker like children. I watched with mild amusement as I crunched on my third biscuit. *I wonder how much of the crown's support money went into those dresses?*

Sapphira rubbed her brow in irritation for a moment before clearing her throat. "Girls," She said firmly, instantly silencing the two before Odelia could hurl a biscuit into Brielle's hair. "You shall both be visions of beauty tomorrow for different reasons, but if you cannot behave like a princess, then you shall never get a chance to become one." She gave them a stern glare and they settled back into their seats, still slipping annoyed glances at each other. "Now then, there is one other matter I need to address." She directed her attention toward me, and I gave her a disinterested glare as I spread jelly on biscuit number four. I was not in the mood for her slandering today.

Sapphira gave me a slightly appalled look at my unladylike performance, so I politely shoved the entire biscuit into my mouth before meeting her gaze. "Yes, stepmother?" I mumbled through crumb-coated lips. Her disgusted expression brought a bit of sunshine into my gloomy mood.

"Do control yourself, dear," she said with a bit of a gag. "I simply wanted to inform you that you will not be permitted to join us at the ball tomorrow evening." She plucked the fourth invitation from the envelope and tossed it into the parlor's fireplace. The girls watched with rapt attention as the paper vanished into flames. They darted their gaze back toward me with anticipation, obviously looking forward to my disappointment.

"Very well then," I said casually, while applying more jelly to a fifth biscuit. All three women looked at me in confusion.

"Meaning you will stay home, alone, tomorrow," Sapphira clarified, as if I hadn't understood the first time. "Due to your negligence to follow my orders regarding that ridiculous job application, you will be forced to remain home until your birthday." She pressed her lips into a fine line, awaiting

my reaction.

*She was going to keep me cooped up until my birthday?* I can't say I'm surprised. I took another bite, my stomach was beginning to overstretch from the sweets, but my family's appalled reaction made it too entertaining to stop. I picked up the last biscuit on the tray, despite still having one in my hand.

"Yes, stepmother, I understand. I have no interest in attending the ball, so I hope you all enjoy yourselves."

Sapphira pursed her lips. "Good," she said tartly, clearly taken aback by my lack of reaction. "In that case, you will not mind if Brielle takes your dancing slippers. It's not as if you were ever going to have a chance to wear them, anyway." She raised her chin slightly, looking to strike a nerve.

"Very well then." I shrugged. "I have no interest in dancing, and I've grown accustomed to walking around barefoot. You should really try it sometime, stepmother." I smiled at her sweetly, and she tensed.

"That's quite alright, dear," she said rather conceited. "I have a tad more self respect than those who play in the dirt." Her villainous smile returned, and I felt myself grow hot with frustration.

Even when I tried not to let her bother me, she still managed to dig her claws in. I took a calming breath. "The 'play' that you refer to, is what produces such beautiful gardens for the manor grounds. I thought you held an appreciation for appearances, stepmother?" I asked with a challenging glare.

Her relaxed features grew stiff with annoyance. "I do care, dear. But gardens are such fickle things; they aren't like art or furnishings. If you leave them alone for too long, they go wild and require far too much attention... much like half-witted stepdaughters." Her eyes narrowed. "If you don't cut them back early, you'll only have an ugly mess on your hands."

I matched her intense gaze, summoning up a foolish amount of bravery. "What do you know about gardens? Much like stepdaughters, you've never cared for either." Without pausing to consider my actions, I stood from my seat and marched over to Sapphira with my teacup in hand. While making direct eye contact, I poured the remaining contents of my cup into Sapphira's lap. She let out an ear-splitting shriek as the girls simultaneously cursed at me. Not wanting to wait around for the following consequences, I dashed out of the room and sprinted. All the servants were rushing toward their screaming mistress, eyeing me as they went. Once I made it outside, I was instantly met by the familiar cluster of gardeners.

"What in the realms happened in there!?" Chester exclaimed breathlessly. They must have run over from the back of the garden. *How loud had Sapphira's scream been?*

"What did you do this time, child?" Beatrice asked with a pointed glare.

"W-what makes you think it had anything to do with me?" I stammered a little more guiltily than I had intended.

Beatrice and Yvette crossed their arms as Yvette raised an eyebrow at me. "Kalina…"

I buckled under the weight of her glare. "Alright, I may have poured my tea on her," I confessed, tossing my hands up in the air. All three of their mouths dropped open, and I huffed. "She was antagonizing me! I just couldn't take it anymore, and thought… I don't know what I thought. I just couldn't let her keep ridiculing me like that." I slumped down in the grass, tucking my head between my knees. I was too frustrated to cry, but I couldn't face my friends with the shame of my actions right now. A gentle hand touched my shoulder.

"Oh, Kalina…" Yvette said soothingly. "You shouldn't have done what you did, but you don't deserve what the mistress does to you, either."

A second hand touched my shoulder. “Ya only have a few more days. Yer strong enough, Kalina.” Beatrice’s warm voice eased my tension. “Ya just need to funnel that bravery of yers a little better. Pouring tea on yer stepmother won’t get yer application back.” She squeezed my shoulder slightly and I sighed. She was right. I needed to keep a tighter rein on my tongue… and my temper.

“I’m just disappointed that I missed it!” Chester chirped in. “Next time, let me know if you’re gonna embarrass the mistress. I could’ve been casually clipping bushes by the parlor window.”

Both ladies groaned at Chester’s mischief, but I let a weak laugh sneak out of my huddle. Slowly, I stood to my feet, allowing the group to embrace me. “You’re right, thank you all. And I’ll be certain to pencil in my next act of defiance, Chester.” I winked at the boy.

He grinned back at me and chuckled. “That’s all I’m asking!”

I looked back at the bustling house and imagined Sapphira’s rampage. She was likely planning on boarding me up in my room for the next five days. I thought back to my letters with the mystery man; I had never returned his last note. He was expecting me at the ball tomorrow, and I couldn’t go. What would he do if I ignored both his letters and the event? My gaze followed the garden over to the horse stables.

“You’re not planning on running, are you?” Yvette asked with suspicion. “Cause I don’t think that will help your reputation any. Also, it would only help the mistress evict you from the house sooner.”

“No, not running...” I admitted cautiously. “But there is somewhere I need to visit, before Sapphira chains me up in a make-shift dungeon.”

The ladies shared a knowing look with each other. “To the palace gardens?” Beatrice asked with intrigue.

“Yes…” I paused. “I just want to see the flowers one last time before being cooped up inside.” I gave them my most convincing smile, but they only smirked at me.

“Kalina, did you think we wouldn’t notice that smile of yours every time you got back from a ride?” Yvette raised her brow with humored accusation.

“Or the fact that ya always had a letter sticking out of yer pocket each time?” Beatrice added.

“I was going to tell you…” I felt my cheeks grow warm as a swell of embarrassment flooded me at their knowledge, and I couldn’t seem to push it away.

“There’s nothing to be getting red about,” Beatrice jested. “It’s about time you got some friends outside of us old folk.”

“Eh!” Chester detested. “Who are you callin’ old? I’m not even fifteen yet!”

The two ladies passed an amused glance between themselves as they ignored his outburst. “You better hurry now,” Yvette said. “Go leave your message, but don’t be gone too long. You don’t want to invoke any more of that woman’s wrath than you already have.”

I nodded in nervous agreement. “I should go. Thank you all.”

I took off toward the stables and found myself mounting Burlap once more. Pumpkin was napping, and I didn’t have time to stir her. Without even bidding Corliss a hello, I mounted the mare bareback and sped out of the stables. I had barely made it beyond the stable doors when I noticed something that made my heart shatter into a thousand pieces. A chill breezed straight through my bones as I took in the heart-wrenching scene playing out across the grass.

Sapphira was standing outside, pointing a long finger toward my garden. Following her outstretched hand were three of her most loyal servants, each carrying a large pair of garden shears. I clasped my hand over my mouth as I watched my three companions attempt to block their path. A sharp word from Sapphira forced the gardeners to stand down and the servants continued forward.

Chester wrapped the two women into a heart-broken hug as they hid their eyes from what happened next. The first servant pulled apart their shears, positioned the blades just below the blooms of my mother's pink rose bush, and then…

*Snap*

I couldn't watch. Foolishly, my eyes turned to Sapphira, who had noticed me on Burlap. Her furious eyes burned at me from across the grounds, unmoving in their dominance.

*Snap, snap, snap.*

The horrid sounds of my garden's destruction pained my ears. A triumphant smile spread eerily across Sapphira's face. She looked so proud, so pleased that she had taken away the last remnant of my parents' memory. The snapping echoed louder, and her smile grew brighter.

I couldn't take it anymore. I ran.

With a flick of Burlap's mane, I escaped down the road. Once Sapphira disappeared into the distance, I let my tears fall. Hurt and anger erupted inside me as I pushed Burlap to move faster. *How could she!? Over a little spilt tea!?* I cried out in anger as I ran Burlap along the quiet road. She knew that Father loved that garden as much as I did, yet she destroyed it with a smile. What kind of twisted woman would do such a thing?

As many times as Sapphira had threatened to destroy my garden, I somehow believed in the back of my mind that she wouldn't go through with it. Father had romanced her by bringing her bouquets of the fresh blooms and had proposed to her amongst those roses, but clearly, none of that mattered to her. All she cared about was controlling me, using me for her last paycheck from the kingdom, and then depositing me in the trash, much like those beautiful flowers… Hot tears rolled down my cheeks, so I had to wipe my eyes in Burlap's hair before approaching the capital roads. I didn't need to fuel the fire of my deteriorated position amongst the society. Not that wiping a few tears could save what Sapphira had already sowed.

Once I approached the garden's familiar birch bench, I sat upon it in silence. My heart was too heavy to appreciate the beauty in front of me. The typically vibrant flowers seemed almost colorless through my tear-filled eyes. I had planned to leave a letter, but instead, I could only sit. My gaze lingered on the various blossoms, and I imagined the sickening sound of snapping shears, beheading every bloom. My throat tightened, threatening to release more tears, but I swallowed them back.

I hadn't even brought something to write with. How was I meant to leave a message? I slumped back onto the bench with a broken sigh as I contemplated my options. There was no chance I would be able to return to the garden until after my birthday. Sapphira and the girls would be out for the ball, but I'm sure the gardens would be closed for the event. If I didn't explain my absence to my mystery companion, would he forgive me for the rejection? Would I lose him, too? My stepmother may have managed to take more from me than she realized…

A heavy weight hung down on me as I realized how soon my life would be stolen from me. In less than four days, Sapphira will have won. She'll have successfully stolen my inheritance, the crown's support for my upbringing, and the last remains of societal standings I possessed. She'd done it. She had successfully disposed of her unwanted stepdaughter in nearly every way imaginable, and here I was, the victim, unable to even leave a note that might prevent me from losing my only real friend along with the rest of my life.

Feeling as though my purpose in lingering was gone, I stood from the bench and slowly trudged back to Burlap. I only made it a few steps before I caught sight of a perfect stargazer lily, just like the one I had grown for my sample. My footsteps halted momentarily to gaze at the flower, my

misted eyes softening on its beautiful shape. My gaze lingered on the bursting center of the star-shaped flower when an idea struck me.

I reached into the bloom and plucked the dark-brown, pollen seeds from the center of the flower. The dark pollen instantly stained my fingers upon contact, solidifying my idea. With the seeds in hand, I returned to the birch bench and scraped my note into the wood. The pollen provided a strong contrast to the light wood, but it was difficult to write with such a small item. With a significant amount of struggling, I managed to buff in a simple message.

*I'm sorry, we cannot meet. Please forgive me.*

The note hardly conveyed what I meant, but it was the best I could do for now. I rushed over to the muddy section of the garden and dipped my thumb into the ooze. I then returned to the bench and pressed my thumb into the wood alongside the words, sealing my note. As long as no rain came, and the pollen didn't smudge, the message should stay. Hopefully, it wouldn't take long for my companion to check the garden. I also had to hope that he would notice the message when it wasn't hidden in the flowers, per usual.

With a dissatisfied sigh, I dropped the remaining seeds and left my note as it was. Standing around and wondering wasn't doing me any good. So instead, I returned to Burlap and rode off into town, aiming for anywhere but home.

# chapter nine

I wasn't sure where I was going. All I knew was that I wasn't ready to see the carnage left in the place of my once flourishing garden. Just the thought of the destruction left me feeling cold and empty. I couldn't go back yet, so instead, I wandered for hours. At a slow walk, Burlap and I circled the town at least three times, slowly watching the sun set over the horizon. The city was built like a bullseye, with the palace in the center, the gardens circling it, and the rest of the city spanning out from there. The farther out you moved from the palace, the less reputable the businesses became. At this point, I was on the outskirts of the capital, passing by overgrown shops and run-down work mills. By the time it had grown dark, I considered returning home, but my stomach growled too loudly at me to think clearly. Unfortunately, an obscene amount of biscuits hadn't been enough to tide me over for an extended ride, and I didn't have any money on me…

My stomach loudly announced that it didn't care about my empty pockets, so I dismounted Burlap and led her to what appeared to be a lack-luster tavern. Perhaps I could request a scrap of bread and some water. If I volunteered to scrub a few pots, they may even serve me some stew. I tied off the mare and approached the entrance. The sign above the door was almost too weathered to read, but I could still barely make out the establishment's name.

*The Godmother's Brew*

I stepped through the doors, and the smell of stale alcohol instantly hit my face. For a moment, I considered turning back out the doors, but a pair of eyes had already locked onto me the moment I entered. A young woman—not much older than me—stood behind the bar. Her dark hair was tied behind her head with a bright red scarf, and her intense stare locked me in place from across the room. The rest of the tavern was loosely packed with a few drunken guests, none of which appeared to be very reputable. I suppose I wasn't one to judge reputation as they probably held more dignity than I did at this point.

As I stepped further into the room, the barmaid continued to eye me down as I calmly approached her counter. My roaring stomach convinced me to stay inside, despite my mind telling me that this was a terrible idea. I decided to let my stomach win the debate and pulled up a chair in front of the counter.

"Never seen ya 'round here before," the barmaid said frankly. "The names' Camille, can I get ya something, girlie?" She gave me a less than discreet stare as she noticed my bare toes.

I ignored her judgmental gaze. "Actually, I was hoping I could request something small to eat. I don't have any money, but I would be happy to work off my meal." I looked at her hopefully and she raised an eyebrow.

"A penniless noble? Now that's a first." I gave her a puzzled look, unsure of how she knew my status, and she gestured at my simple attire. "Ya may not dress like the rest of the fancy folk, but the fabric yer wearing still comes from the capital's dress makers. I must say, though, I'm not accustomed to serving guests without shoes." I felt my face grow red as she eyed my exposed feet once more.

I was too well-dressed to be accepted by the slums and too underdressed to be recognized by the nobles. Sapphira had made me give up all my more embellished dresses for the girls. The ones I had now were the ones my father had bought me when he was still around. Only just the plain ones remained. Typically, I wasn't embarrassed about my plain dress or lack of footwear, but being called out made me feel a tad shyer than usual. "I-I'm sorry, I don't actually own any shoes suitable for outdoors."

The girl stared at me with a perplexed look. “No money, no shoes, and no one to keep ya from wandering into my bar. Girlie, it sounds like ya need more than just a meal. Tell ya what, I made too much soup for this meager crowd, anyway. How about I pour ya a bowl and you can entertain me with yer drama. These drunk fellas don’t provide as much entertainment as you’d think.” She scoffed in the direction of the grimy men who littered the tables, and a few gave her a humored smile in return.

“That would be wonderful, thank you. I promise to entertain you with as many stories as you please regarding my horrid stepfamily.”

“Stepfamily?” Camille poked her head out from behind the kitchen doorway. “Dang, am I glad you visited. This is just the juicy gossip I was missing out on.” She hurried back to the counter and placed my bowl atop the sticky wooden surface.

It took a lot less time than I had imagined to spill my life’s story. Camille listened with rapt attention, reacting dramatically to the evil-doings of Sapphira and the girls. Only a few times did she have to step away to pour a beer or serve another bowl of soup. The tavern was pretty quiet, with only a few presumed regulars passing through. Once my bowl was empty and my tale had been told, Camille sank into a chair across from me.

“Yikes, girlie. You’ve got it worse than I do.” She gestured around the tavern. “I inherited this dump after my deadbeat father walked out on me. The place has so many debts piled up on it, I’m sure we’ll be closing soon, but at least my ma looks out for me. I always thought nobles were a little up on their high horse, but stealing money from the crown that’s meant to support an orphaned child…? I think you could use something a little stronger to drink, girlie.” She snorted playfully, but I wasn’t certain her offer was empty.

“Well, perhaps I can help you manage your tavern after my name is officially dragged through the mud.” I sighed, petting my fingers against the sticky, uneven surface of the bar top. “Once news spreads about my absurd application, I’m certain not even an establishment like your own would hire me. Oh, no offense!” I darted my eyes up to the girl, searching her face for any resentment.

She laughed. “None taken! And I’d hire ya on, though I couldn’t pay ya anything other than meals, but hey! There’s worse options.” She chortled a little longer as she whipped a rag out from her brown-corseted bodice, brushing crumbs carelessly onto the floor.

“I may end up taking you up on that offer,” I said, my gaze following her swishing rag. “Unless I can somehow undo what Sapphira has planted, I’m going to be grateful for any meal I can acquire.” I looked up to Camille who had paused, as if lost in a thought. “Everything alright?”

She matched my gaze, still frozen with her hand clutching the rag, an unidentifiable expression masking her green eyes. “Say, there’s an idea…” She stood a little straighter, tucking the rag back into her bodice. “Why don’t ya do that then? Undo what she’s done?” She leaned forward on the counter, drawing nearer.

I arched my brow. “Undo what she’s done? How could I possibly do that?” I asked cynically. “The application has already been submitted. It likely hasn’t been reviewed yet, since no gossip has been spread about me, but it’s only a matter of time. It’s not as if I can walk into the palace and ask for it back.”

A slow smile crept across the young lady’s face. “But... what if ya could?” A gleam of mischief sparkled in her eyes, and I was growing fascinated by her apparent plan.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if ya could take back yer application?” Her tone brightened as a new smile dawned her rounded features. “Not only that, but what if ya could replace it with yer actual application instead! Oh! I have just had the most brilliant idea!” She hopped excitedly behind the

counter, and I simply stared at her in confusion.

"Would you care to enlighten me with this brilliant idea of yours?" I asked a little more impatiently than I had meant to, but I was getting nowhere thus far.

"It's simple, girlie." She pulled up her stool and seated herself across from me. "There's that fancy ball happening tomorrow night, right? All ya gotta do is go to the ball, dance with the prince for a bit, and then sneak off into the royal offices. If ya can locate the housekeeper's office, then I'm certain ya can find the applications along with it. Then all ya'd have to do is switch out the letters, and then dance the rest of the night away! Abra-cadabra, yer reputation is saved, and ya might even get yer dream job! Not to mention that if ya rise up in society, ya could earn enough social influence to bring yer stepmother's misuse of the crown's funds to light. What do ya think!?" She threw her arms up in the air with an extravagant flair.

I stared at her agape. "Sneak into the royal offices? Are you mad?" I asked earnestly, but she didn't seem fazed by the dilemma. "If I'm caught, I could get thrown into prison... not to mention my stepfamily will be at the ball. She would stuff me in the dungeon herself if I turned up, not to mention I don't even have a proper ball gown." I had expected Camille to show at least a sliver of concern at my list of problems, but her smile only grew wider.

"I think I can help you with that." Her mischievous glint reappeared in her eyes just before she dashed back into the kitchen.

I remained where I was, still feeling bewildered by her suggestion, but admittedly, there was a part of me that wished it were possible. If I could swap out my application, I would have a chance at a real life again. Not only that, but I might even get to fulfill my dreams of running a flower shop. If my reputation was spared, I could also agree to meet my garden friend… Would he still want to meet me? As my thoughts carried on, Camille returned to the counter with a large wooden crate in her hands. She sat the box down in front of me with a heavy thump, sending dust particles flying through the air. I coughed the cloud out of my lungs as Camille placed her hands inside the crate, digging around for something.

"People leave stuff around here all the time, so I started collecting a bit of a lost-and-found if you will." She pulled out a few odd trinkets, books, and cloaks as she continued to search deeper. "A few weeks back, a gentleman with silver streaks in his hair stopped by for lunch. He left his bag and never returned for it, so I've held onto his belongings." Her eyes widened as she pulled out the bulging shoulder bag that had been shoved to the bottom of the crate. "He must have been a peddler of some kind; it only makes sense considering what he was carrying on him. Here, have a look."

She passed the bag over to me and my arm nearly buckled from the weight. Something far too large for a shoulder bag had been condensed to fit inside. The moment I unlatched the leather buckle across the top, it burst open. I stared at the contents in confusion. Why would a mage carry this around?

Poking out the top of the bag was a lavender satin ball gown. As I tugged the rest of the fabric out of the bag, the skirt exploded to its full size. It was completely strapless and had a simple lace overlay across the bodice. The skirt was plain, but was terribly wrinkled after being compressed. Upon closer inspection, the bodice also possessed a couple of unidentifiable stains, and the skirt had a decent-sized rip, slitting the back. As I held up the gown, Camille continued to smile brightly, as if this worn-out gown was the solution to all my problems.

"It's lovely, Camille, but how does this solve the problem of being recognized by my family?" I placed the gown back on the counter and she bundled it up into her arms.

"I was hoping you'd ask!" she chirped excitedly. "Let me ask you a question first. Who am I

and what do I do?" She looked at me expectantly, as I remained momentarily baffled.

"Uh, your name is Camille, and you're a bar maid?" I raised a brow at her, less than amused at this apparent game of hers.

"Correct!" She snickered to herself, then threw the gown loosely over her head. The petite girl disappeared under the heavy satin and didn't reemerge until just her head poked through the top. Her arms remained sheathed beneath the bodice somewhere, and she looked at me expectantly once more. "Okay, now tell me again. Who am I and what do I do?"

I let out an exaggerated sigh, but then paused. What was her name again? Wait a moment… did I know this girl? Why was she asking me such a question? I don't believe we've ever even spoken. She certainly looked a little bizarre with that ball gown draped over her. Does she have me mistaken for someone else? I looked around awkwardly, unable to find the words to reply to this perplexing young woman. Out of nowhere, she began to laugh at me and I felt a sudden rush of embarrassment.

"I'm terribly sorry, but do we know each other? I can't seem to recall your face?" I gave her an apologetic look, hoping she wasn't anyone of importance that I had offended. Despite my question, she continued to laugh at me, which was odd considering she was the one with half a dress on. I bit my tongue, not certain how to proceed, and suddenly, the girl began to strip the gown from her head. I ducked to avoid being smacked in the face with the flailing petticoat. Once the gown was placed fully on the counter before me, I lifted my head and gasped.

"Camille!" I jumped in shock. "How did you… What was… I could have sworn you were a stranger a moment ago."

The green-eyed barmaid cackled even more before wiping a joyful tear from her eye. "Ah, it never gets old." She hooted. "It turns out, that dress is enchanted. Whoever wears it cannot be recognized by anyone who looks at them. Pretty neat, huh?" She cocked her head at me in search of praise and I laughed.

"That's remarkable!" I exclaimed in newfound astound. "So... if I were to wear this to the ball, not even my own family would recognize me?"

Camille shrugged. "You tell me. You didn't seem to know a thing about me just now, so what do you think?" She gestured at the dress laying between us, and I gawked at it with new appreciation.

"I could really do this…" I whispered under my breath.

Camille must have picked up on it because she snorted once more. "Of course, ya can. I'll tell ya what. Why don't you take this off my hands for me, and if it all works out, just remember me when you start making it big with those fancy nobles." She winked and I felt my mouth fall open.

"Are you sure? You won't miss it?" I picked up the top of the beaten dress and gazed at its lack-luster details. "You said your tavern was in some debt... wouldn't selling a magical dress bring in a hefty paycheck?"

She paused for a moment, silently considering her next words. "I like to think of it as a better investment," she stated smoothly. "I might make a couple hundred gold off the dress, but then that's it. If ya end up getting this job ya want, then maybe I'll have a new financial ally who would be willing to help save a struggling business." She stretched her hand out to me, offering a hand shake. "So what do ya say, girlie? Do we have an agreement?"

I clenched the lavender dress, imagining all the problems I might possibly solve in a single night. But could I really do it? Could I really be brave enough to break into the king's offices? Was my situation truly bad enough that this was my only option? I thought back to Yvette and Beatrice and their offer to take me in after Sapphira does away with me. I could still be happy with them, I'm certain of that, but how much would I be losing out on? A striking pair of blue eyes flashed through

my mind. If I don't do this, I can never share my identity with him. We'll forever have to be nameless, faceless letter correspondents. Is that what I wanted?

I gave the satin fabric one final squeeze before dropping it from my clutches. My eyes locked onto Camille's and I thrust my hand into hers with a firm shake.

"Deal."

# chapter ten

"You look ravishing, Your Highness, truly," the tailor awed as he applied the final touches to my coat.

I fidgeted nervously as Sebastian pinned the tail of my coat. The tailor gave me a stiff glare at my movements, so I did my best to straighten despite my fretting thoughts. Tonight was the night I had to choose my princess, and the only person I had any semblance of considering didn't want to see me. My chest tightened at the thought of her mysterious message. Marlon had told me that the note was scratched into the bench, with perhaps some form of natural dye. I already wasn't certain what to make of the description, but then the message itself sent me into a whole new state of tension.

*I'm sorry, we cannot meet. Please forgive me.*

My heart ached as I stared at the bright magenta zinnia Sebastian had pinned to my lapel. She didn't want to meet me. *Was it out of dislike for me? Or fear of something greater?* She had been the one to extend friendship toward me, so why would she reject my invitation... unless there was an outer force preventing her from doing so. My thoughts trailed back to the fragile girl who had been flung so easily into the puddle of mud. *Nobody could possibly be endangering her, right?* I shook the thought from my mind with a physical quiver, earning another glare from the tailor. I was getting ahead of myself. It's likely something as simple as her having a strict family. However, if that was the case, then meeting me would only make things easier on her. What noble family would deny their daughter the chance to meet the prince? Maybe I should confess my identity in my next letter? I pondered the idea until my father interrupted the tailor's work.

"He looks magnificent. Well done, Sebastian." The king praised the tailor vibrantly, who, in turn, gave a polite bow.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Sebastian said with a gleeful smile.

I stared at my lavish attire in the tall brass mirror. The dark blue tailcoat and golden sash were certainly flashy, considering I often preferred a more understated look, but I was meant to be paraded around as the prized steed this evening. The brighter my peacock feathers were, the more likely I was to attract a worthy bride—or at least, that's how Sebastian had described it. I stepped down from the tailoring pedestal and approached Father with my arms spread wide.

"What do you think, Father? If you were a fair maiden, would you desire a dance?" I bowed dramatically while pursing my lips and lifting my little finger.

Father stepped forward gracefully, and pressed a hand to his chest. "Well, how could I refuse such a dashing fellow like you?" He swooned with excessive flourish, while batting his lashes. Always leave it to father to best my sarcasm.

"I'm happy to hear it." I chuckled. "Hopefully tonight we will find the next queen of Drancos." I sighed quietly, remembering Daisy's note. I really wished I could have introduced her to Father. I opened and closed my fists as the words of her letters replayed through my mind.

A sudden touch on my shoulder made me look up. "Marlon told me about your invitation." Father smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry, my boy. There may be more to the situation than what she was able to say, so don't let it dull your spirit. If she wasn't the one, then I'm certain there will be another young lady ready to turn your head tonight," he said softly, giving my shoulder a loving squeeze.

"I suppose you're right. I guess I'll just have to try a new approach at wooing a woman. Do you think I should push them into a fountain next time?" I pressed a hand to my chin, in deliberate thought.

Father released my shoulder to smack me upside the head. "You'll find yourself an old maid if

you pull that kind of stunt again. You might be king one day, but women like to look nice under their tiaras, not drenched in muck." He scolded with a light humor in his eye. "I want grandchildren, so don't blow this for me," he laughed snidely and I pushed his hand away.

"There's always an ulterior motive with you, isn't there?" I jested back. The two of us laughed for a moment, simply enjoying each other's presence. I had always been grateful to be born a prince, but I was even more grateful to be the son of such a loving king. He inspired me to one day rule with the same love and compassion he extended beyond his own family. I could only hope to be half the ruler he was someday.

We both retired to the nearest parlor in order to breathe in some peace before the big event. The invitations had been sent, the food was being prepared, and the decorations were ready. All we had to do now was wait. I sat back in the rounded armchair and closed my eyes, trying to relieve some of the stress building up within me. I was going to meet my future wife tonight, or at least, that was the goal. *Would she be everything I had ever hoped for? Would she make a good queen someday? Would she relieve my mind from thoughts of Daisy?* I opened my eyes and sighed, recognizing my obvious reluctance to let go of the hope that my garden companion would change her mind. As I situated myself in the chair, I caught sight of a rather distraught expression on Father's face.

"Father?" I questioned. "Is everything alright?"

"Hmm?" He glanced up at me with a distant look before snapping himself out of his daze. "Oh, sorry, son. I was only thinking about the merchants that invaded a few weeks back." His calm tone did little to mask the concern in his eyes.

"I had nearly forgotten about that," I admitted. "Are you concerned that they are working toward some sort of goal? It has been quite some time since their breach, and we haven't heard any word since. Maybe they were only misguided refugees from Sybettal, who could only cross the border by force?"

The king's eyes glossed over into thought once more. "It's possible, but unlikely that a group of simple refugees could take out so many trained soldiers. I'm afraid that my fear stems from their patience. If they entered our kingdom with a malicious agenda, then what better time to enact trouble then on the evening of a grand ball." His gaze cast over toward me, and I could sense his fatherly fear.

"You're worried they intend to do me harm because I'm the only heir," I said flatly, filling in the blanks of his worries.

"Indeed," he sighed. "There are no other blood heirs who could take the throne. If something happened to you, then a member of court would have to be appointed as the next heir. I'm afraid that a high-ranking member of the nobility has considered this factor and has chosen to hire trained mercenaries to do away with you. The guards will be stretched thin for the ball already, so it would be far easier to assassinate a prince…" His voice withered away as his terrified expression held onto mine, his cherished son.

"I will be fine, Father." I stood from my chair and crossed over to where he sat, joining him. "If you're truly concerned, then we can shift a few of the guards around so I have more protection. But the ball is a massive event and will be full of witnesses; any noble would be a fool to attempt a strike against the crown on such an occasion." I placed a calming hand upon his arm and felt him release a touch of tension.

"You're right," he said reluctantly. "I'm just being a paranoid old man, aren't I?"

"Not at all," I smiled. "You're being a wise king… You're still old, though. I can't deny that." He smacked me upside the head again, and I laughed. I definitely deserved that.

"You'd better watch that wit of yours tonight while you're trying to catch a wife. If you're not careful, then this *old man* will be the only one snagging dances with the young ladies," he scolded teasingly. "I do think I'm going to adjust the guard positions a bit for the evening. It sure would help me enjoy the party if I knew you had a few extra eyes on you tonight."

I nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem to arrange. I'll handle the details now." I stood from my seat and crossed over to the door. I had nearly exited when Father called back to me.

"Jasper, I'm proud of you." His loving voice sent warmth through me in a way that only he could do. "Have fun tonight."

"Is everything ready?" Prince Conan asked as he inspected the tools laid out before him. The morning light glinted off the various daggers and swords that lay out across the grass. The prince stopped occasionally to give the weapons a closer inspection but appeared overall pleased with the array. He picked up a narrow sword, testing its weight as he passed it between his hands. With a solid swish of the blade, he sliced off a single strand of hair that hung in front of the man's eyes before him.

"Yes, Your Highness," the man replied, unfazed by his new trim. "Our entry point is secure and the uniforms were acquired last night. We shouldn't have any trouble breaching the palace and getting close to the royals."

"Excellent." A wicked smile flashed across the prince's face. "And you're certain that our little recruit will be there?" He looked across the small crowd of men that addressed him, inspecting them over for any ounce of uncertainty. He spun the sword's hilt around in his palm, flashing its silver blade before his men.

"I personally guarantee they'll be in attendance, Your Highness," the brown-and-silver-haired man stated confidently.

"Good." The prince stepped forward, eyeing his soldier. "Then if anything goes wrong, I'll know who to apply the consequences to." The prince watched as the man displayed no sign of intimidation. He was confident in his words. Perfect.

"Time to suit up, men," the prince commanded. "Our preparations begin now." He twirled the blade in front of his eyes, grinning wide in the steel's reflection. "We finish at midnight."

# chapter eleven

The morning sun blared through the attic window, rousing me awake. I wasn't sure what time it had been when I got home, but it was late enough that everyone else had gone to bed, and I had to sneak in through the back. I stretched my limbs, trying to shake off some of the exhaustion. As my mind came back to me, I recalled the events that had kept me out so late.

I was going to the ball tonight.

A surge of anxiety and adrenaline spurred through me as I looked over at the brown paper package sitting on my wobbly desk. Camille had helped me wrap the dress in the bundle in order to hide it from any prying eyes I may have encountered on my way inside. Fortunately, no one had bothered to stay awake long enough to see my return. Sapphira was likely hopeful that I was gone for good, but little did she know that I was not only back, but back with a vengeance. Tonight was my chance to reclaim everything she had taken from me, and I wasn't going to dawdle any longer.

I threw my blanket aside and jumped out of bed, carefully avoiding glancing out the window. It had been too dark last night to see the remnants of my garden, and I wasn't sure I could handle the sight just yet. Tears still burned in the corner of my eyes when I recalled the memory of Sapphira's triumphant smile. They may have been only flowers to her, but to me, they were a part of my family's history and a part of their memory. Sapphira had crossed a line.

As I reached for the paper package on my desk, I quickly unraveled the twine that held it together. The dress unfurled before me, still as wrinkly as before, or perhaps a little more so now. The dress would have been pretty if it had been in better shape. The top had an elegant, strapless bodice and the satin skirt was full of volume, but the tears, stains, and wrinkles made it a little difficult to appreciate. I would need to make a few alterations before I could take it into a royal ball.

Not wasting any time, I dug through my trunk and produced a small sewing kit. Laying the dress out on my bed, I began by pressing the wrinkles out as much as I could with a few heavy books I had stored. There wasn't much I could do about the stains on the lace bodice, but I could mend the tear at the base of the skirt. The rip was a little worse than I had originally thought, since it appeared that a part of the fabric had been torn off by whatever ripped it. I selected a scrap of light purple fabric from my old embroidery supplies and used it to patch up the tear as best as I could. It wasn't a perfect match, but it would have to do. Hopefully no one would look too closely in the middle of a crowded ballroom. A shudder of nerves rolled down my spine at the reminder that I would likely see a lot of scathing glares tonight. Perhaps if I mended the dress well, it would look presentable enough that I could disappear amongst the crowd.

As I began to sift through my supplies, a sudden noise alerted my ears. Someone was climbing the attic steps. *But why would anyone come up here?* I didn't have time to ponder the information before I recognized the incoming, high-pitched chatter of Brielle and Odelia. My heart raced as I scrambled for the dress that still lay strewn out across my bed. In rapid movements, I bunched up the dress into a sloppy fold and stuffed it back into the paper packaging. My fingers trembled as I tied the twine back, binding the paper as the door flew open.

"Oh great, she came back after all," Odelia scoffed with an unladylike eye roll. I held her gaze as calmly as I could while I slid the package off my lap, hoping they wouldn't pay it any mind.

"Don't look so nervous, sister, it's not as if we came up here to speak with *you*." Brielle said snidely as she approached my open trunk. "We're only here to get the dancing slippers Mother had foolishly bought for you." She leaned over my trunk and began to rummage through it, tossing my

belongings indelicately onto the floor.

I breathed a sigh of relief. If that's all they were here for, then maybe they would just ignore me altogether.

"Help yourself. I have no need for such shoes." I smiled sweetly but felt a twitch at the corner of my eye. Actually, I could have used the shoes now that I was planning to attend the ball. I hadn't even considered proper footwear…

"I was already planning to." Brielle commented in a bored tone. "I wasn't asking your permission. Everything in this crummy house belongs to Mother anyway, and she decrees that these slippers belong to me. Ah, there they are!" She pulled out the untouched box and tore it open. The silver shoes were extremely flashy, which was probably why Sapphira bought them for me. There wasn't a single gown in my cupboard that could pair with such shoes. Brielle's eyes sparkled as she held the glittering shoes up to the light. "These should work beautifully with my dress, don't you think, Odelia?"

The older sister eyed the silver shoes for a brief moment, before she turned her gaze back to me. "Yes, I believe they will…" she replied vaguely, her eyes now cast upon the package to my side. "Kalina, what is that you have there?" She narrowed her gaze in on my package and I felt my body stiffen.

"Oh, this?" I gestured at the paper as nonchalantly as I could. "It's just some old stockings I need to throw out. I was doing some cleaning," I lied as calmly as I could, but Odelia only glared further.

"I see. Well, if that's all that it is, then why don't I dispose of it for you?" Her tone challenged me, testing my lie.

I swallowed uncomfortably. "That's quite alright, Odelia. I can handle it myself. Besides, I didn't think a proper young lady such as yourself would ever belittle herself to play with trash." I raised an eyebrow, matching her challenge.

She straightened, then passed a silent glance to Brielle as if trying to convey an unspoken message. The younger sister gave her a confused look for a moment before a wash of understanding flooded over her. She turned her gaze to me, and I tried to maintain my relaxed composure, despite my pounding heart. Brielle's gaze fell to the unguarded package, and within an instant, she lunged forward and snatched it from the bed.

`"No!" I reached forward, trying to retrieve the bundle, but Brielle was already fleeing down the stairs with Odelia close behind. Racing down the stairs, I followed them as quickly as I could. Their covered feet gave them the advantage of being able to sprint down the coarse attic steps. I did my best to keep up with them, but a sharp sting in my heel alerted me that I had acquired a new splinter. Ignoring the digging pain, I pushed past the servants until I found them both standing in the parlor, smiling, with Sapphira standing between them.

"Brielle, give that back." I demanded, my patience long-gone. "You got your shoes, so leave the rest of my belongings alone."

"Mother, Kalina is trying to hide something from us; she even chased us down the stairs for it," Brielle said with feigned innocence as she passed the package to her mother.

"Brielle! You're the one who snatched it out from under me!" My voice grew louder and Sapphira rolled her eyes.

"Girls, we do not have time for this. There is a ball to prepare for." she said in annoyance, dangling the package loosely from her fingers.

"Mother, she's only getting defensive because she has something she shouldn't," Odelia chimed in. I wanted to rip out her pretty blonde hair.

"I wasn't hiding anything! You both came barging into my room and ran off with my belongings!" I cast my gaze desperately toward Sapphira, hopelessly pleading with her to return the package to me. My sights narrowed in on the concealed dress that held my last chance for a real life. "Stepmother, please, I just ask that you return what's mine."

"Don't give it to her, Mother," Odelia snarked. "She's been disobedient enough as it is. Whatever it is, I'm sure she doesn't deserve it."

I clenched my fists, trying to restrain myself from blackening her eye. If I lunged at her now, I could kiss my dress goodbye. Instead, I directed my attention to the vile woman who dangled my last shred of hope from her dainty fingers.

"Please, Stepmother," I begged, praying that just once, she would show an ounce of sympathy toward me. However, she looked entirely annoyed with the whole situation, and proceeded to roll her eyes once more.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, girls," she huffed impatiently and stepped over to the fire. I watched my dreams shatter as she tossed the paper bundle straight into the blazing hearth.

"No!" I cried out, running to the smoking fireplace. I smacked my hands down on the stone hearth as I stared brokenly into the blinding orange flames.

Sapphira stepped aside in complete ignorance as she addressed her daughters. "There. Now go back to getting ready. We don't have time for any further foolishness."

"Yes, Mother," the girls said in unison, a sick smile creeping onto both of their faces. The three of them followed each other out the door as I was left staring hopelessly at my burning dreams.

I scrambled around the room looking for a fire poker and grabbed the first one I found. With rapid movements, I scooted the burning paper out of the heart of the flames and pushed it onto the stone front. The paper was still ablaze after I got it out, so I grabbed the nearest cushion and batted at it until the flames were fully smothered. Smoke filled the room, causing my lungs to stir and cough. My eyes stung from the thick smoke as I set aside the singed cushion and gingerly inspected the smoldering bundle in front of me.

The paper was entirely burned off, but the dress still seemed to be mostly intact. I gathered up the warm bundle into my arms and raced back up to the attic to view it further. When I laid the dress back out over the bed, my heart sank.

The lace that once covered the strapless bodice was now completely singed and even entirely burned off in some places. The satin underneath seemed to be intact, but the black soot had left stains everywhere, even beneath the lace. The majority of the skirt had been folded up in the middle of the package, so it came out mostly unscathed, but the entire hem had a fresh line of black char encompassing it. In a few places, the burn had even trailed up the skirt a couple of inches. Overall, the top and base of the dress were utterly ruined by the flames and ash. I sat back on the bed, staring at the mess in front of me.

*How could this have happened?*

I bit my quivering lip, trying to hold back the fresh tears that threatened to fall. There was no way I could go to the ball in a dress like this… They wouldn't even let me past the front gate, even if they couldn't recognize me. And now that it has been damaged, I wasn't even sure if the magic still worked. I touched the burned lace, wondering if its power had been scorched away with my dreams.

As I wallowed in my own self-pity, I found myself longing to visit my garden. The peace of my father's memory had always been a comfort to me, and now at my worst hour, it was gone. Never again would I be able to look at my mother's pink roses and remember what life was like when she was still with me... before Sapphira ever infested our home.

For the first time since its destruction, I allowed myself to gaze out the window and mourn what had been lost. Tears instantly stung at my eyes as I saw the uprooted mess of dirt that replaced my beautiful flowers. Stems and leaves lay scattered across the ground in stripped pieces, each one too destroyed to recognize what it had once been. As I scanned over the carnage, I noticed something peculiar about it. Amongst all the wreckage, I could only spot a few loose petals on the ground, the rest of the mess was made up of roots, stems, and leaves. I looked again with a more focused eye, but only a handful of petals could be seen littered across the ground.

*Where had all the flowers gone?*

My question was soon answered when I caught sight of Yvette along the side of the stable. I gasped as new tears filled my eyes. Lined up along the stable were dozens of jars, pots, kettles, and basins, all filled to the brim with my freshly cut garden. I covered my mouth in awe as I watched Beatrice and Chester approach the wall with another jar of roses in hand. Clusters of my familiar blooms burst with color against the stark stable wall.

*They had collected the flowers for me so I could enjoy them for even just a little longer.*

My heart swelled with joy as I leapt to my feet to run out and thank them. As I passed by my bed, I froze, my gaze hovering over the ruined dress. It was then that an idea popped into my mind. A smile slowly spread across my face as I reached for the dress and wadded it up in my arms.

“Thanks for the idea, stepmother.”

# chapter twelve

I rushed straight to Yvette and wrapped her into a tight embrace. The woman jumped at the sudden contact, but then relaxed and hugged me back.

"Where have you been, child?" she asked sternly, pulling me at arm's length. "We've been worried sick about you. We didn't even know if you came home last night." As Yvette lectured me, Beatrice and Chester approached with armfuls of salvaged flowers.

"Kali!" Chester ran forward, flinging petals in the air behind him. "Thank goodness you're alright. I thought for sure you were gone for good." His relieved voice carried awkwardly through the mass of flowers in front of his face. I opened my mouth to explain myself, but Beatrice cut me off.

"What's that in yer arms?" Her gaze dropped to the bunched-up gown that covered my entire torso. Yvette seemed to finally notice it as well. She must have been too relieved to see me to notice the mountain of fabric in between our hug. I took a quick glance around the garden before gesturing for them to follow me. The trio gave me a look, but allowed me to lead them to the side of the stable, which was blocked from the manor's view. I took one final glance around before deeming it private, then unfurled the dress in my arms. At first, the gardeners shared looks of shock at the sight of the voluminous gown, but as they stared longer, their expressions morphed into obvious distaste.

Chester scrunched his nose. "Did you go digging in some alley trash while you were out?"

I sighed. *This might be more difficult than I thought.* "No, Chester, this was a gift." I smiled at the three pairs of questioning gazes. "I'm going to wear it to the ball tonight!"

Silence followed, along with more disgusted expressions amongst my audience.

"Kalina, you'd be better off accepting the consequences of your stepmother's mischief than wearing *that* in public," Beatrice sneered. "Just look at that thing. It looks like it's been stuffed down a chimney, and it smells like it, too." She pinched her nose, and I only then noticed that the smell of smoke was a tad potent.

"Why do you want to go to the ball anyway, Kalina?" Yvette inquired.

"Because..." I took a deep breath, "I'm going to break into the palace offices to swap out my application before Sapphira can ruin my hopes and dreams for good. And I'm going to need this dress to do it." I raised the dress a little higher as the jaws around me dropped.

Chester leaned over to whisper in Beatrice's ear, "Do you think the destruction of the garden finally unhinged her?"

"Chester!" I snapped, placing my hands upon my hips. "I am perfectly sane, thank you. In fact, I believe I'm thinking clearer than ever before. Sapphira has made me suffer for long enough, and this is my only chance to reclaim the life my parents wanted for me." I spouted the words boldly and the gardeners' expressions grew more sympathetic.

"Oh, Kalina…" Yvette began. "We know your father wanted more for you, but sneaking into the palace...? Dear, that's only going to get you thrown into prison." She tried to place a compassionate hand on me, but I pulled away.

"I can't go to prison if I'm never caught," I retorted with a cheeky smile. The group eyed me nervously, likely considering if I had actually lost my mind.

Chester scratched his head. "How would you manage that? You're not very sneaky, Kali, not to mention that the mistress would recognize you."

I watched as their confused faces became increasingly more worried as my boldness only persisted. Without wanting to keep them in the dark any longer, I pulled the dress over my head and

arms, throwing it loosely over my torso. Once my head found its way out through the heavy satin, I watched their faces morph into lost gazes. A rush of relief flooded over me as I recognized the enchantment doing its job. *So the fire hadn't damaged the magic after all, thank goodness.*

"I'm sorry, miss, but can we help you?" Chester asked with a puzzled look, snapping me out of my relief. The other two gardeners looked equally confused by the strange girl standing behind their stable in a trashed ball gown. I stifled a laugh, then pulled the garment back off, noticing an instant change in the trio's eyes.

"Kalina?" Beatrice blinked, trying to process what she was seeing. "Was that…? Did ya just…?" She looked over at the others as if they had an explanation, but Yvette only shrugged with similar bewilderment.

"I told you I needed the dress." I laughed. "It's enchanted, so no one can recognize me when I wear it." I threw out my arms in a grand display, and the group finally showed signs of understanding.

"If you wear that dress…" Yvette paused in contemplation. "You may actually be able to undo the mistress's plans without putting yourself in any danger… You could spare your reputation, and perhaps even get the job!" Her eyes lit up with excitement, and I smiled back brightly.

"Precisely!" I exclaimed. "There's only one problem I have to deal with first…"

"The fact that it's uglier than a dead mule?" Beatrice stated, unashamed. I gave her a slightly offended look, and she shrugged. "Am I wrong? It's filthy, damaged, and it reeks of ash."

I looked down at the crumpled dress in silent agreement. "I know, we can thank my stepfamily for that, but I have a plan to fix it. I will need all of your help in order to pull it off. What do you say? Can you help me get ready for the ball?" I looked at them all pleadingly.

"We're here for you, Kali," Chester said with a broad smile. "I don't know how we can salvage that mess, but I'm happy to try to help."

"We'll all help," Yvette added and Beatrice nodded alongside her. "Just tell us what you need."

A warm gratitude filled me as I looked at their kind faces. "Thank you all." I smiled once more, then switched my mindset into a much more serious focus. I only had a few hours to get this done, and we needed all the time we could get. "Yvette, I need you to find thread, lots of it, and at least three needles. Beatrice, I'm going to need your help taking my measurements. The dress is a little too wide on me at the moment. And Chester…" I turned to the young boy, who stood readied at attention, "bring the flowers."

My fingertips were numb and swollen from the hours of needlework I had just completed. Between the four of us, it still took the entire day to complete our masterpiece, which now lay hidden behind the stable. I pressed my aching fingers into my palms, trying to relieve some of the sting as I watched the horse-drawn carriage pull up in front of the manor. Sapphira had insisted on hiring a coachman from the capital, instead of using our own staff. The richly adorned carriage stopped just short of the front steps while the four milk-white horses whinnied in place. I took in the scene from the front entry window, impatiently waiting for my family to depart.

Once Milton noticed the carriage, he retreated upstairs to retrieve the ladies of the house. As they all descended the steps, I caught full view of their expensive gowns. If I was being honest, they each looked beautiful. Brielle wore a stunning Isallan-red gown, with rubies and pearls stitched around the neckline, and Odelia looked gorgeous in a dark blue gown that highlighted her full figure. Admittedly, Sapphira looked dazzling as well in her purple gown with black lace cascading down the bodice and sleeves. All of their blonde curls were ornately piled on their heads, each with matching hair pins that I'm certain cost more than anything I had ever owned.

As they gracefully glided through the dining room, my stepsisters each passed me a cynical half-smile while eyeing my bland attire. Brielle even made certain to flash her silver shoes at me while she pranced toward the door. How thoughtful of her... I tried not to meet their eyes but was forced to look up when Sapphira stopped in front of me.

"We will be back before morning, dear," she said a little pompously as she tucked a silk fan into her bodice. "Until we return, you are to remain here and stay out of mischief. Milton will be keeping an eye on you." She gestured to the butler, who bowed obediently in response. "Good night, Kalina. Enjoy your evening." Her words came out more of a mockery as she flaunted her dress in front of me.

I watched out the window as the three of them loaded into the carriage and departed for the ball, each smiling ear-to-ear. Once they were clear from sight, I stood to face Milton. The older man eyed me curiously as he noticed my apparent energy that I was trying to mask. I opened my mouth to create some form of excuse, but he held up a finger to silence me.

"Whatever it is you're planning, Miss Kalina, I want to hear nothing of it," he said firmly. I opened my mouth again to protest, but he shushed me once more. "Not. One. Word." I closed my mouth, and he smiled. "Good, now with that said, I want to take the opportunity to say something to you. In all the time I have worked here, you have been a light in this house, despite the shadows that linger around here…" My eyes widened as I caught his underhanded insult to the girls, though his expression remained still. "My mother used to be an extraordinary gardener. I always appreciated the natural beauty she could conjure. It was rather disheartening to discover the mistress lacked the same appreciation for the wonders of nature…" His eyes flicked to mine, a sly glint in his gaze. "I'll make it clear. I don't have any intentions of exiting my room until the mistress's return. This will be the last you see of me until the morning, miss. So, if you'll excuse me, I shall bid you a good night." He bowed to me, then turned from the room without another word.

I stood motionless for a moment, trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened. *Did Milton just defy his mistress for me?* My heart warmed at the thought of Milton silently appreciating my garden before it was destroyed. He must have been pained by its destruction as well. If what he said about his family was true, it was no wonder why his loyalties had shifted.

A devious smile stretched across my lips as I finally made my dash for the garden. Before stepping out the door, I grabbed the application letter, invitation, and cloak I had stashed in the cupboard earlier. As I ran outside, the warm summer grass tickled my feet while the hot sun began to sink low in the sky. I raced around the hidden side of the stable and was instantly met with an entire herd of familiar faces. Yvette, Beatrice, and Chester were waiting for me, but Corliss and Pumpkin had joined them as well.

"Sorry to barge in on the fun, but they filled me in on your plans, and I figured you could use a mount." Corliss smiled as he gestured toward the pre-saddled mare behind him.

"Wow, Corliss, I don't know how to thank you." I walked over to stroke the mare's nose, happy to finally have a chance to ride the beautiful creature once again.

"Ya can thank him later," Beatrice said sharply, grabbing both Corliss and Chester by the arm. "Right now, ya both need to go elsewhere so Kalina can get dressed." The two boys blushed as they acknowledged the older woman's statement, then hurried around the opposite side of the barn.

I looked to the two women hopefully. "Is it ready?" I asked wistfully, biting my lip to fight off a new rush of nerves.

"Yes, dear," Yvette said sweetly as she turned back into the brush. With the help of Beatrice, they held up the improved gown for me to fully view.

I gasped, throwing my hands in front of my mouth. "It's incredible!"

"And it will look even more beautiful on ya, but not if ya only stand there gawking at it," Beatrice scoffed.

I nodded before slipping off my simple day dress. Before adorning the gown, I slid my application letter into the interior pocket beneath the skirt. We had added the opening earlier in the day so I wouldn't have to carry the letter openly through the ballroom. As I approached the garment, I paused before stepping into it.

"Once I put it on, you won't know who I am." My eyes flitted between the two women who didn't appear to be too concerned.

"It will be alright, child." Yvette smiled reassuringly. "Just explain that you're our Kalina, and it will be fine."

With a deep breath, I stepped into the gown and pulled the strapless bodice into place. Beatrice began to cinch in my laces, and I felt the dress hug my form perfectly. Her alterations had been more precise than I had realized. As she neared the end of the laces, I felt her fingers stop working, and I whirled around to meet her newly confused eyes.

"I know it's ya, Kalina," Beatrice said calmly, still staring at me in surprise. "I remember everything ya told me about the dress, and how ya were planning to wear it, but when I look at ya…" Her blank expression held mine.

"It's like seeing a stranger," Yvette finished. "I can't even think of your name when I look at you." She turned to Beatrice and the two women shared a look.

"It's me, I promise," I assured them. "And I need your help getting ready for the ball. Can you do that for me?" I gave them a pleading look, and they snapped out of whatever shock they had been in.

"Yes, of course," Beatrice said firmly as she continued tightening my laces.

Once I was securely in the dress, Yvette helped me quickly comb out my hair and pin it back with a pink rose. My gaze lingered on the flower before she put it into my hair, and she noticed me staring.

"This one was from your mother's rosebush," she breathed as she secured the flower in place. "Your father cared for that bush so well after she passed, both of their love helped grow this bloom." She stepped back with a bittersweet smile. "And now you can carry their love with you at the ball tonight. They'll be with you the entire night."

A tear welled up in my eye, but I brushed it away before it could fall. Beatrice helped me toss my cloak over my shoulders, just before calling back the boys. When the two gentlemen returned, they shared the same shocked looks at my appearance the ladies had possessed. It took a little more explaining to convince them that I was truly Kalina and not some thief who wanted to run off with their prized mare. Once Corliss had been fully swayed, he assisted me onto Pumpkin's saddle. The weight of the dress made it exceedingly difficult to hoist my leg over the mare's back, but with a bit of struggling and some unladylike wobbling, I managed.

"Thank you all, for everything," I said sincerely as I looked down at my companions. "I'll be sure to return home before the girls. Wish me luck!"

"Good luck, Kali! Don't get arrested!" Chester cheered as Beatrice whacked his arm.

"Be safe, dear," Yvette called sweetly.

I smiled down at them, flicked the reins, and Pumpkin and I took off for the ball.

# chapter thirteen

The palace was already bustling with people when I arrived. The gardens had been closed off to the public for the event, but the lanterns within the grounds had all been lit, illuminating the beautiful greenery in a whimsical light. Dazzling carriages lined every walkway for miles down the road, and the closer I got, the bigger the knot in my stomach became. Gloriously dressed young girls stepped out of their carriages, escorted by their parents and chaperones, each one more glamorous than the last. I peeked down inside my cloak, comparing my dress, and felt a wash of nerves rush over me. *Would I stick out too much? Or worse yet, would they even let me inside?* My bare toes brushed against Pumpkin's soft hairs as my thoughts spiraled. I hadn't been able to solve the dilemma of acquiring shoes, but the dress touched the floor when I stood, so I was hopeful that no one would notice my lack of footwear. If they did notice, then… I suppose we'd just cross that bridge if we arrived to it.

As I drew closer to the entrance, the crowd became too thick for me to pass through on Pumpkin. Without much other option, I pulled the mare over to a line of ornamental trees and tied her off there. I didn't have a coachman to look after her, but I trusted no one would be foolish enough to try to steal a horse in the king's front yard. With Pumpkin taken care of, I directed my gaze to the entrance, my invitation clutched tightly in my hand. I had seen the palace maybe a thousand times throughout my life, but I had never been inside it. The beautiful structure suddenly appeared far more daunting than ever before. I gulped as I imagined how difficult it might be to find a single office behind those massive walls. A feeling of uncertainty tapped at my mind, but I shoved it aside.

*I can do this…*

One foot after the other, I approached the brilliantly glowing entrance, alight with ornate lanterns and candles. Freshly cut flowers lined the pathway to the entrance, arranged in polished brass vases. I took a moment to appreciate the display, then frowned when I realized they hadn't trimmed the leaves at the base of the stem. *Those won't last very long…* My attention turned back to the path as I scolded myself for critiquing the servants' hard work. *There would be plenty of time for that later… Assuming tonight goes as planned.*

It was beyond intimidating to attend such an event alone, but at least I didn't have any escorts to sneak away from. It was actually a good thing that Sapphira didn't want me to attend, otherwise I would have been stuck under her watchful eye the entire evening. As I grew closer to the line of guests awaiting entry, the tense feeling in my stomach worsened. My hand brushed against the soft rose in my hair, stroking the velvety petals with a gentle touch, and a sense of calm washed over me, easing the nerves. *At least I'm not truly alone…*

As I lined up behind a richly dressed family, my fingers lowered to pet across the invitation in my other palm. With everything going on, I had nearly forgotten the reason I could attend in the first place. *Someone here had gifted me this invitation.* A new rush of nerves filled me as my gaze flicked to all the young gentlemen who filled the path. A few of them had flowers pinned to their jackets, but none adorned a magenta zinnia. *He must not have arrived yet, or perhaps he's already inside.* I breathed a small sigh of relief at the knowledge that my correspondent wasn't visible yet. There were only so many anxieties I could handle at a time, and meeting the man who had been a nameless, mud-covered face in my mind for weeks was a bit more than I could handle currently. Besides, even if I did notice him, I couldn't reveal myself until my application had been switched. As long as Sapphira's fake document remained behind those walls, he could never know who I truly am.

Although, I suppose he wouldn't be able to recognize me as long as I was wearing this dress…

My thoughts distracted me until I approached the front of the line. I stood frozen for a moment as the steward eyed me down with an outstretched hand.

"Invitation, madam?" The steward's white-gloved hand hovered expectantly in the air.

"Oh, of course." I attempted to sound graceful, but still bumbled a little as I handed him the paper. I cringed as he accepted it, noticing that it was now dampened from my nervously sweating palms.

Thankfully, the steward didn't seem to notice the dampness. Instead, he turned the invite over in his hands once to inspect it, then gave me a friendly smile. "Please enjoy your evening." He gestured for me to enter and the guards in front of me parted ways in unison.

I bid him a proper thank you, then walked past the statuesque guards. My heart pounded violently in my chest as I climbed the stone steps that led almost ominously to the palace doors. *This was real. I was really about to attend a royal ball by myself.* I clutched my cloak, subconsciously trying to shield prying eyes from my dress. *Would people laugh at me? What if my garden friend really was here? What was he expecting to see from me?* My stomach twisted into knots as I took slow, deliberate breaths.

*You can do this, Kalina. This is the time to be brave.*

I stepped through the ornate doors and was instantly directed to the ballroom by a stout footman. I followed the various servants, who guided me with stiff steps, wondering if they noticed the lack of clicking on the marble floor from my uncovered feet. No one I encountered seemed to bear any mind to my wardrobe, so I relaxed at the notion that I had at least successfully made it inside. My cloak fully covered my dress, but it was in rather shabby shape. Despite the wool cloak being a little worn, I much preferred to keep it on than to flaunt my homemade dress yet. When I was deposited at the entrance to the ball room, I noticed a short line of guests stood in front of a massive set of regal doors.

"May I take you cloak, madam?" A cheery-faced footman stretched out his hand to me and I stiffened.

My focus shifted over to the group in front of me as they stepped forward to take their turn entering. The doors swung open onto a grand staircase, allowing the entire crowd to ogle them as they entered the ball. I gulped nervously and looked back at the footman. He was still smiling at me, and I knew I couldn't simply refuse his offer—no matter how badly I wanted to hide under the safety of my cloak.

I forced a smile. "Yes, that would be lovely, thank you." I turned so he could remove the cloak from my shoulders.

Once the garment slipped off me, my bare shoulders were engulfed by the warm palace air. I silently stepped forward to the ballroom, not risking a glance back at the footman. If he showed even an ounce of distaste toward my attire, I likely would have turned and ran. My feet carried me almost ghostly over to the towering doors. I paused in front of them, feeling entirely petrified. They swung open and the light of the ballroom was almost overwhelming. I blinked against the sparkling glow before steadying my nervous legs.

I held my breath and stepped forward onto the steps, and the entire room went silent.

"Look alive, son," the king whispered, nudging me in the ribs.

Another yawn slowly crept over me as I watched the hundredth maiden walk down the marble stairs. My legs twitched uncomfortably from being cooped up in the box seat all evening. All the

young ladies had certainly been pretty, but I wanted to know more than what they looked like. Unfortunately, the first part of the evening was reserved for me to gawk at everyone from my elevated throne. My seat gave an excellent view of the ballroom. Candles twinkled against crystal fixtures and jeweled chandeliers. The white marble floors had been polished so brightly that they caught and reflected all the light around them. The room was an almost dizzying display of dancing light and color, and it made it difficult to focus in on anyone's particular expressions or features. That might have been the reason why everyone seemed so attractive so far… It was also a time for them to stare at me and was, overall, the shallowest part of the evening. The amount of winks and flirtatious hair flips I had endured so far was nothing short of exhausting, but sadly, there was no avoiding it.

My stomach growled greedily as I caught a whiff of the fresh cream pastries that had been laid out on the serving tables. My eyes focused hungrily on the tantalizing sweets, and Father nudged me again to adjust my eyes back to the stairs. I sighed, trying my best to ignore my sweet cravings. It wouldn't be very dignified for a prince to indulge in a messy cream puff in the midst of his ball, despite how unfair the notion seemed.

I propped my arm up on my throne, resting my chin in my palm as I watched the next family cascade down the steps. Their daughter fluttered her lashes at me from across the room, and I fought the urge to yawn again. It couldn't be much longer before the dancing began, so I only had to endure the boredom a little while longer.

Despite my self-encouragement, I felt my eyes drift shut for a few moments. It felt so soothing to let them rest, so I let them stay shut for a moment longer, deciding it was worth the risk of Father's chastising. I might have even dozed off, but the room suddenly quieted. The lack of sound relaxed me even more for a moment before I recognized the oddness of it. When I opened my eyes, I first looked at Father, wondering if he held the same confusion from the lack of chatter. However, when I looked at him, his eyes were still fixated on the stairway.

"Wow…" he breathed, his eyes widening.

I raised a brow, not sure what could have spurred such a reaction from him. Wanting to know for myself, I turned my attention to the stairway to take-in whatever sight had enthralled my father. But I wasn't ready for what I saw…

I felt a catch in my chest, and my mind filled with awe. "Oh…"

Father cast me a smug side-look, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the maiden who had stolen the breath of the entire room. Never in my life had I seen such a dress. It was beyond astounding, but I didn't recognize the girl who wore it. It was impossible to make out all the details of her face from this distance, but no one else seemed to recognize her, either. Strangely, she was entirely unaccompanied, but that only made her glowing presence stand out more. She looked downward into the crowd with a shyer posture than I would have expected. It was almost as if she didn't realize she had captivated the entire room…

I knew exactly who stood on those stairs... I had never seen her face before, but we had spoken enough for me to recognize her presence when I felt it. No one else could send my heart racing like that.

"It's Daisy…" I reminded myself to breathe. "She's here."

# chapter fourteen

I think I stopped breathing when every eye in the ballroom turned to me. My first instinct was to turn around and run, but my legs were too petrified to obey my wishes. I risked a glance down at my dress, wondering if it had come apart on my ride. I cast a quick look downward, but everything looked the same as it had before I left.

It may not have been as flashy as the glittering, jeweled dresses below me, but it was far better than it had been earlier today. The strapless bodice had been completely burned and ruined in the fire, so we had ripped off all the remaining lace. The edge of the skirt had been stained and burned as well, and since there was no time to replace that much material, I had to get creative. The only solution I could come up with in such a short amount of time was to cover up the damages with something else. So that was what we had spent the day doing.

The entire bodice and edging of the gown were now completely covered in live flowers.

From the waist up, vibrant blooms circled my torso and shaped my neckline. The edge of the skirt was lined with fresh, stitched-on flowers. Roses, carnations, lilies, lavender, and more trailed the hem of my gown, showcasing their vivid colors against the pastel silk. In some areas, the flowers spread slightly up the skirt, creating a sort of "over-grown" effect. The lavender silk was now only visible on the upper part of the skirt, where none of the fire or previous damages had reached. I had thought it was beautiful, but I had always loved my garden, and now I was practically wearing it. *But was it too odd for the nobility? It wasn't made up of the same jewels and lace that the other ladies wore…*

Their silence terrified me. No one else even attempted to wear more than a single bloom in their hair or pinned to a jacket. This was far bolder than that, and I feared that it was drawing more attention than the original singed-gown would have. I took a deep breath. *I can't back out now…*

With a shaking hand, I reached out for the banister, steadying myself for the first step. *Just be brave. No one can tell who you are. You can do this.* I took slow, calming breaths as I gracefully lowered myself into the ballroom. I felt as if I descended the stairs in slow motion. The eyes never left me as I finally touched my toes to the cool marble floor. I knew that somewhere above me the royal family was watching… but I didn't dare look up. I could hardly handle the scathing looks from the guests, and I couldn't bear the shame of being judged by our rulers as well.

As the next family entered through the doors, the crowd turned their attention back to each other, returning to their murmuring. I carefully weaved my way through the crowd, keeping my head high and eyes low. Every few steps I would notice an older woman side-eye me, or a younger girl graze her eyes down my gown. It seemed that everywhere I walked, people stepped away from me to gawk. I took in a subtle breath, testing to see if the smell of smoke still lingered on the gown, but the only scent that filled my lungs was that of fresh flowers. In fact, the smell was incredible. Not a single perfume that I had ever whiffed from my family came close to the fragrance of the collaged blooms.

Feeling a little relief at my fresh scent, I decided to deposit myself in a corner of the exquisite room. Eyes were still following me, along with the occasional whispers, but the last of the guests had entered and the dancing would begin soon. Hopefully, the movement of people and the addition of the prince would cause enough distraction for people to stop staring at me. That would be the best chance for me to sneak away.

My gaze darted around the room, trying to take in all the sights and sounds at once. At one point, a smiling serving maid offered me a small glass of wine. I accepted it gratefully and sipped the tart

drink. I would have preferred a glass of water over wine but having something to sip on eased my churning stomach. After polishing off the short glass, I turned my attention toward the spread of hors d'oeuvres and desserts. My eyes landed on a fluffy pastry that had fresh cream spilling out its sides. I smoothly collected a plate and adorned it with three of the tantalizing sweets, along with an apple turnover and something covered in chocolate. The first bite of cream puff melted nearly all my nerves as I relished in the confectionary treat. I gulped down the pastries as gracefully as I could while existing in pure bliss, then nibbled on the turnover and chocolate mystery. After I cleared my plate, I skirted off to a desolate corner of the ballroom to watch the rest of the guests enter and secretly licked my fingers clean. If nothing else happened tonight, then at least the desserts made the trip worth it.

As more families cascaded down the stairs, I took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the ballroom. Dazzling chandeliers sparkled above our heads, each lit with hundreds of individual candles. Tall windows lined the wall that opposed the staircase, and even seemed to open up to a few balconies. The windows were framed by heavy, velvet curtains that stretched from the floor to the ceiling, embroidered along the top with the Drancos crest. Ornate decorations of flowers and jewels adorned the various serving tables and walls, and I once again found myself imagining how I would improve their arrangements had it been my job. My eyes followed the walls, appreciating the glorious displays of artwork and ageless tapestries that adorned the open room. Light danced across the entire room, illuminating the floors, windows, and people. It was all so mesmerizing… it was like a dream from a fairy tale.

While taking in the sights, I continued to direct my gaze away from the people who I caught staring at me. The feeling of their eyes made me entirely uncomfortable, and I felt it best to avoid eye contact. As I continued to linger in the corner, I noticed a rather peculiar set of eyes cut into me.

A man, no more than thirty, was staring me down intently—he wasn't even trying to be subtle about it as he looked directly at the skirt of my gown. He was dressed in a black tailcoat and gray trousers, with a glass of wine resting delicately in his hand. He had brown hair, but it was slicked back with a dark tweed cap covering most of it. After a moment of us staring at each other's appearances, we caught each other's eyes and I nearly jumped. His eyes were so dark, they were nearly black—a very uncommon trait for Draconians. *Maybe he was a foreign ambassador?* I brushed my fingers cautiously around my face and lips, making certain he wasn't staring at any cream or chocolate that had been left behind by my treats. After he caught my gaze, he still didn't stop his stares until a similarly dressed gentleman pulled him into a conversation. The second man was much younger, maybe in his early twenties, but he too had dark eyes. He had darker hair than the older man, and didn't wear a hat. I watched them curiously for a moment before the younger man pulled the older one away. With the strange stare-down complete, I returned my attention to the bustling crowd.

The entire ballroom seemed to glitter with all the shining dresses and jewelry that glistened off the guests. There was no doubt this was a betrothal ball, because every woman under the age of thirty appeared as richly dressed as a queen. I wondered what the prince was actually like or if he's even worth all the efforts. From what I'd heard from the girls, Prince Jasper wasn't very sociable and often spent his time shut in a library instead of fraternizing with the ladies of court. The girls always presented the information as if it were unattractive, yet they were here somewhere too, attempting to catch his eye just like the rest. I continued to admire the array of gowns around me when a familiar purple skirt caught my eye.

Sapphira stood maybe twenty feet away from me, eyeing me down intently. Her glare was a little less subtle than the others who had stared, and I instantly tensed under her eyes.

*She doesn't recognize me, right?*

I casually looked in another direction, hoping she would lose interest, but her striking blue eyes remained trained on me. My heart rate increased as a realization dawned on me. *What if she recognized the flowers?* I instinctively wrapped my arms around the front of my dress, brushing the soft petals against my skin. She had looked upon these flowers almost every day, how could she not recognize they were from her property? I cursed myself for neglecting to consider such a thought, then slowly moved toward the opposite side of the ballroom. Her eyes dug into the back of my head as I caught a glimpse of her purple gown trailing behind me. I risked a quick look back at her, hoping to see that she was aiming for someone else, but she was still staring at me. Her expression, however, was not the stern-faced stepmother expression I had expected to see. Instead, she looked extremely confused, as if she was certain about the origin of my dress, but entirely lost about how this unknown girl had come to wear it. She likely just wanted answers on how a random girl came to wear her disgraced stepdaughter's flower patch.

I didn't want to take the time to concoct a story for her, so I continued to push through the crowds unapologetically. As I did so, I noticed that the faces had all turned back to the stairway and the chatter had quieted once again. My eyes flicked upward for a moment, just in time to see the grand stairway doors begin to swing open. The crowd in front of me had stopped moving, so I was forced to halt behind them. Fortunately, Sapphira now seemed more interested in the doors than me. I breathed a sigh of relief as I looked up the stairwell with the rest of the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the squire pronounced, "may I please welcome to you, his Royal Highness, Prince Jasper Garrett Cyprus of Drancos."

Applause filled the ballroom as the overly-embellished man stepped forward. Dozens of young ladies giggled and swooned as his attractive features came into view. The tall, young heir smiled politely at the clustered crowd below, earning another round of swoons from the nobility's daughters. I had to admit, he was good-looking. His blonde hair and tall physique made him the perfect, picturesque prince. No wonder all the girls wanted him… As he stepped grandly down the stairs, I noticed something peculiar… His eyes… They were blue for starters, but not like Sapphira and the girls' eyes; they were deeper than that, and they were hunting for something, or someone.

The prince's head remained entirely even with the stairs during his descent, but his eyes darted around as if they were involved in a desperate search. I watched with new interest as he slowly combed the crowd from his higher vantage point. It wasn't until he had nearly touched the ground that his eyes fell on me. I felt my body stiffen under his gaze, wondering if he took the same offense to my odd gown as the rest of the nobility had, but he didn't look at me scornfully…

As a matter of fact, his eyes softened as they remained fixated on me. Then the strangest thing happened, he started moving toward me. I felt my breaths grow shallow and rapid as the crowd parted in front of me. The prince's expression brightened the closer he got to me, and I felt my panic swirl into desperate confusion. *Did he have me mistaken for someone else?* I cast a quick glance around the room, looking to see if I was standing in anyone's way, but no one was behind me. I pressed my hands to my side, feeling the pressure of the flowers graze my skin. Their sweet aroma was almost dizzying as my mind continued to swim. I glanced back at the prince, who was now almost in front of me, and that was when I saw it…

*A magenta zinnia.*

I gasped as I noticed the flower pinned to his lapel. I blinked a few times, trying to confirm that I really saw what I thought I was. *This isn't a dream, right?* The vibrant pink flower was unmistakable, and I found myself staring at it until it was only inches away from me. I looked up, my breathing entirely frozen. *It can't be…*

My garden friend, the man who tossed me into the mud so many weeks ago, was right in front of me… And he was the prince.

My gaze moved from the flower to the eyes of the man before me. They were his, identical to the eyes I had first seen covered in filth, the eyes I had imagined so many times as I wrote to him. I opened my mouth as if to say something, anything—an apology, a thank you, an outburst about how I never knew he was royalty—but nothing came out. All I could do was stare at him in disbelief as he smiled at me like I was the only person in the entire room.

"Hello, Daisy," he said quietly, bowing before me. I touched my hand nervously to my mouth. He knew who I was, or at least, who I told him I was. *Was it the dress that gave me away?* It certainly wasn't a lack of magic, since Sapphira hadn't fully recognized me. Also, the mystery ma—I mean, the prince, had only seen me slathered in mud.

He raised slowly, his eyes drawn to mine. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you." He took my hand and placed a delicate kiss upon the top. My heart twitched at the touch, his dazzling blue eyes never looked away from me. "I'm so honored that you came, my dear Daisy. Since you're here, I believe I should fulfill the promise I made to you… Would you care to learn the true meaning of a magenta zinnia?" He smiled at me, a charming twinkle in his eye.

I forced my lungs to start rising again, so I could answer his question. "I would be honored… Your Highness." I added his title a little breathlessly, still in shock from his identity. *He's really my garden friend… and the prince.*

He stifled a small laugh, then plucked the flower from his lapel and presented it to me with an outstretched hand. "It symbolizes a request..." His blue eyes asked the question before his mouth did. "It means, will you dance with me?'"

# chapter fifteen

I took the flower from his hand with shaking fingers. The amount of eyes on us were unfathomable. *The prince just asked me to dance… But he wasn't just the prince; he was my friend. At least, I assumed he was. Would he still want to be acquainted with me after tonight?* Attempting to block out my thoughts of the surrounding eyes, I tried to fix my attention on only him.

"Thank you, Your Highness," I replied as calmly as I could manage. "It would be a great pleasure to dance with you." I dipped into a deep curtsey, the weight of the flowers sinking me low to the ground before I rose with as much grace as I could muster under the circumstances.

He offered his hand and I accepted, his expressive eyes beaming with joy. "The pleasure would truly be mine." He breathed the words so softly, I nearly missed them. Then he led me with ease into the middle of the ballroom.

My bare toes skirted smoothly across the polished floors, and I feared once again that someone would notice my lack of clicking shoes. When we had positioned ourselves for the first dance, the musicians began to strum a slow tune that built into a casual waltz.

I gulped nervously. It had been years since I had attempted a proper dance. My father taught me the basics when I was growing up, but I never had the opportunity to put the practice to use. *Now I was dancing… in the middle of a ballroom… with a prince… who I had been writing scatter-brained letters to for the last few weeks.*

My skin grew clammy, and the prince must have picked up on my nerves, because he leaned forward to whisper in my ear. "Just follow me." His breath tickled my ear and I felt butterflies stir within me. "If you make a mistake, I'll make one, too. That way, no one will think you're at fault. I promise I won't let you fall." He pulled back to guide me through the next step with a reassuring smile.

I felt a slight bit of tension release from my shoulders as I allowed him to lead me through the movements. He glided me across the room as if I was made of air, never once taking his eyes off me. He looked at me as if I were the most precious thing in the realms, and I couldn't quite understand why. He was a prince, and I was a nameless girl with a second-hand dress. I had offered him friendship and then denied the invitation to his own ball. *Wait… He had invited me to his own ball… the ball designed for him to pick a bride...* My cheeks grew hot at the thought.

His eyes softened in slight concern at the sight of my tomato-red cheeks. "Is everything alright?" he questioned, swaying me softly in his arms.

"Yes, I'm sorry," I said a little startled. "Forgive me, Your Highness. This is all a little overwhelming, to say the least." I cast my gaze to the floor, watching it spin underneath our feet. "Do you not fear that dancing with me for much longer may damage your reputation?" The question was easy to ask when I wasn't looking at him.

He remained silent until I raised my eyes. His face held such tenderness, I couldn't make myself look away. "Why would dancing with the most beautiful girl in the room affect my standing?" He smiled, then spun me gracefully, as if to make a statement that he was proud to be dancing with me.

He caught me back in his arms and I felt my breath catch once more. "Beautiful?" I questioned quietly, searching his eyes for answers. *No one had ever called me that before…*

He smiled proudly, wrapping a gentle arm around my waist. "Stunning." He dipped me low to the ground, then twirled me once more. As I spun, various petals flew free from my dress, filling the

air with the dancing colors. My head spun with my feet as the soft colors danced along with me, filling the space with their sweet fragrance.

When I landed back in his embrace, my feet betrayed me and I stepped hard on the toe of his shoe. The prince winced, but more in surprise than in pain. It was then that I realized I had just given away the secret that I was barefoot. A rush of embarrassment spread into my cheeks, and I looked around the room in fear that someone else had noticed.

Without hesitation, the prince stumbled over his own feet and caught his balance with a laugh. He smiled warmly around the room and the crowd laughed humorously with him. With his pleasant laugh still resonating in the air, he regained his poise and wrapped his arms back around me. I looked at him, awestruck for a moment, and he winked.

"I can't let you forget who the clumsier one is here." He grinned. "I do believe our initial meeting was due to my lack of coordination. It only seems right for the citizens to know just how much you outshine me." He pulled me closer and I could almost feel his heartbeat. It was moving almost as fast as mine, likely from the dancing, of course…

I stared up at him, still in disbelief that he would want to flatter me after realizing I couldn't even be bothered to wear proper footwear. "But, Your Highness—"

"Jasper, if you please," he cut me off with a cheeky smile. "It's what my friends call me, and I do believe that is what you wanted us to be." He lifted me off the ground for a moment as the song reached its end. As he lowered me back to the ground, I fell into a deep curtsey while he bowed in return. Applause broke out from the surrounding crowd, and he looked up at me as I rose. "Although, I'm happy to extend our friendship to something greater... if you express any interest in this clumsy excuse for a prince." He flashed his pearly smile at me, and I felt my cheeks grow exponentially warmer.

"Your Highness—I mean Jasper, I..." I paused, stopping to consider my true feelings. This was him, the man I had appreciated so much when I desperately needed a companion. He was my first friend in years outside of my family's staff. *Did I care for him enough to consider what his title would include*? Did I care for him at all? My heart constricted as I looked up into his ocean eyes. *He looked at me differently than anyone else did…* When he saw me, he saw more than just an orphaned noble with nothing to her name. He saw the girl who had made him laugh, the girl who shared his quirky interest in garden facts, and the girl who, despite trying to say no, had still come to the ball. It was no wonder he looked at me like that. Somehow I had gotten the prince to fall in love with me, and I wasn't entirely certain I wasn't growing to care for him as well.

As the rest of the dancers flooded the floor, Jasper led me to the side of the ballroom for a breather. The entire time he looked at me with admiration and I felt my nerves ease. It was a new feeling—to be considered beautiful—but I couldn't let it go to my head. He *didn't see the real me, anyway.* He could only see what the magic showed him, and I doubted it was anything similar to the real me.

The earlier excitement I felt settled heavily into my heart as I realized the truth of the situation. He couldn't see me, and he didn't even know my real name. My thoughts flooded back to the task at hand as my foot brushed the interior pocket of my skirt. Sapphira's fake letter had included a ludicrous amount of insults directed at Prince Jasper and the king. There was no way I could reveal my identity to him while that letter was still loose. I needed to sneak away and swap the letters, but I had successfully managed to draw the eye of every guest in the ballroom… This was now exceedingly more difficult than it needed to be.

As much as I wanted to remain enchanted by the evening, I couldn't think about the prince

right now, not when Sapphira's letter was so close. If I didn't swap the letters, the entire nobility would make me a laughingstock, and there was no way the prince would be permitted to spend time with someone of such low approval. He probably wouldn't even need to be told to avoid me, and he'd simply take it upon himself to push me away—and I wouldn't blame him. Sapphira was far too skilled at making me look foolish.

As the prince led me away, I began to consider excuses I could use to slip away from the party. Jasper didn't seem keen on leaving me just yet, and the rest of the guests still hadn't stopped watching me. Just when I thought things couldn't get any more complicated, the prince stopped short of a grandly dressed old man with a sparkling gold crown seated upon his head.

My eyes went wide before I could think to curtsey before my country's ruler. "Your Majesty." I addressed him in my most formal tone, keeping my head low to the ground.

"Please rise, my dear. The floor is no place for a lovely young lady," the king said gently.

I stood quickly, wondering if I should feel embarrassed or honored by the king's statement. My silence must have somehow amused the king because he began to laugh.

"There's no need to be so shy. I'm just an ugly old man." The king chuckled. "You'll have to excuse my ugly old son's manners, for he has still neglected to introduce us." He struck a teasing glare at the prince, who possessed a slightly irritated expression. I withheld a small laugh at the altercation. *I hadn't expected the royals to be so... informal.*

"My apologies, my dear ugly, old king." The prince gave a flourished bow as he emphasized every word. "Please allow me to introduce…"

"Daisy," I filled in for him. They both gave me an inquisitive look, but I only smiled sweetly in return. "Please, Your Majesty, call me Daisy." I gave a much smaller curtsey, and the king shared a quiet look with his son before looking back at me.

"It's an honor to meet you, Daisy," he said kindly. "It would appear as if this isn't the first time you and my son have met." He gave me a knowing look and I felt my eyes grow wide. I looked over to Jasper to see if he bore the same surprise, but he only ran a hand through his blonde locks.

"He may have found out about the letters… It's hard to get things past him," he explained, shrugging it off with an innocent grin.

"Well, I do hope he told you whose fault the mud incident was." I laughed, watching a guilty expression creep onto the prince's face.

"Oh, he didn't have to." The king chuckled. "Only my son would be a big enough imbecile to toss an innocent maiden into the dirt." He crossed his arms and gave his son a pointed glare.

"Hey, I apologized!" the prince retaliated with an offended look. "And I offered her my handkerchief."

"You did," I confirmed. "Although... I did have to request it first."

The king looked back at his son with a shaking head. "Tsk-tsk, my boy. I thought I taught you better than that."

Jasper threw up his arms in defeat as the king and I shared a laugh.

"I would like to personally thank you for joining us this evening, Daisy." The king beamed, turning his attention back to me. "I won't keep you from my son for much longer, but I simply had to meet you. He's been moping around like a lost kitten ever since you rejected his invitation."

I turned to look at Jasper, who was now officially redder than a summer strawberry. "I was not," he protested before turning to me. "Though, I do admit to being disappointed. May I ask, what made you change your mind about attending?" Both the prince and his father looked at me expectantly, a curious glint in their identical blue eyes.

I paused. *I couldn't exactly tell him that I was here to sneak into the housekeeper's office in order to swap out a fake application and spare my reputation from endless years of besmirching. Or that I had only decided to attend when an indebted barmaid offered me a magical dress that allowed me to bypass my evil stepmother and stepsisters.* My thoughts swirled as the royals looked at me with rapt attention.

"I had an opportunity present itself," I said vaguely, "and I took it. I'm glad that I did so; it has been a most wonderful evening so far. Your son is truly a gentleman. I dare say that you've raised him rather well." I smiled brightly, hoping my redirection of the conversation would prevent them from questioning me any further. "Although, I must admit, I have grown rather hot while dancing. If you'll pardon me, I think I need to step out for some air." I dropped into another short curtsey before attempting to turn away.

The prince placed a gentle hand on my arm, stopping me before I could dismiss myself. "Please, allow me to escort you."

I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to think of a way to separate him from me, only for a bit. "Don't be silly." I smiled. "Surely you'll have to dance with some of the other ladies. I'll only be a few minutes. Why don't you entertain the others while I step away?" I looked between him and the king.

"I suppose you're right." He sighed, a little disheartened. "It would be rude of me to ignore the other guests." He pulled my arm a little closer to whisper in my ear. "But you must promise to save me another dance."

My heart fluttered at his touch and I nodded. "It would be my pleasure." Once my letter was switched, I would have nothing else to concern myself with. Perhaps then I could enjoy the evening a little more. After all, dancing with him had been so lovely.

"Have fun, you two." The king laughed. "This ugly old king is going to return to his box seat. I'll enjoy watching my boy trip on the dance floor from up there." He shot a wink at his son, who merely rolled his eyes.

"Love you too, Father." The prince jested back.

With a temporary farewell, I managed to slip away from the prince's view and wander around the back of the ballroom. A few of the guests had occupied the outer balconies already, but I wasn't actually interested in going outside. Just before the windows lined the walls, a small servants' door sank into the wall behind the serving counter.

*There.*

Looking around the ornate ballroom, I noticed that all eyes had refocused on the prince, who was now selecting his next dance partner. As a bright-eyed young girl joined him on the dance floor, I took the opportunity to pry open the door. With one final check over my shoulder, I listened to the music fade behind me as I disappeared down the dim hall.

# chapter sixteen

Scurrying through an unknown palace in a massive ball gown wasn't the best plan I had ever concocted. I wasn't exactly discreet, but I figured I didn't need to be. If someone spotted me, I could just ask for directions and claim I had gotten lost looking for the ballroom after speaking with my coachman. And if that failed, I could always run. The dress concealed my identity, so as long as I could make it back to Pumpkin, I shouldn't have to face any serious consequences for being caught.

It wasn't a *good* plan, but it was all I had. This was my last chance to take back what Sapphira had stolen from me, and I didn't plan to waste the opportunity. So many people had helped me get here—the gardeners, Corliss, Camille, and even the prince himself had all made this moment possible—and I couldn't let all their efforts go to waste. Not to mention that now there was Jasper to consider… If I wanted to remain in his life, then I was going to need to be presentable to polite society.

I dashed through the halls, catching the attention of the occasional servant. Most of them remained too focused on their tasks to approach me, but a few stopped to question me. Each time I simply explained my invented story, and they kindly offered me directions to the ballroom. After each set of directions, I learned a little more about the palace's layout. The chamber maids were coming from the northern end of the palace, so that must be where the bedrooms were located. The kitchen staff and scullery maids were coming from the southern end, near the ball room. The fifth servant I'd encountered was dressed more formally, like she may have been a type of secretary or advisor.

She smiled sweetly at me as she offered directions. "My goodness, you're a long way from the ballroom. Just head down this passage and turn left when you see the offices. Then just follow the lanterns to the ball's entrance." She bowed kindly to me then, returned to her duties.

A relieved smile spread across my lips. *I was almost there. In a few more minutes, this would all be over and I could go back to the ball.* With hastened steps, I hurried through the hall the maid had claimed held the offices. Soon enough, a row of oak office doors with names etched in bronze plaques lined the wall. I browsed the inscriptions one at a time, trying to determine which belonged to the housekeeper.

The largest door was at the center of the hall with *King Garrett* prominently displayed in bronze. I stepped past his door, certain he wouldn't be the one dealing with meager hiring procedures. As I walked past his door, a small scuffling noise sounded from inside. *That was strange. Why would someone be in the king's office at a time like this?* For a moment I considered investigating, but I didn't have the luxury of time. It was likely that the prince would look for me after a few dances, and I didn't want to risk him getting suspicious. Instead, my eyes landed on the door of the neighboring office.

*Prunella Frank, Housekeeper*

My heart rate increased as I opened the door and swiftly stepped inside. When the door clicked shut behind me, I darted my eyes around the spacious office. There was a simple mahogany desk, filled to the brim with paperwork and journals. Calendars lined the walls, along with staff schedules, and various other papers. My stomach twisted at the sight of the clutter. *How was I going to find Sapphira's letter in all this?*

Without wasting a moment, I quickly rushed over to the desk and began thumbing through the paperwork. Most of the items on the top related to the ball. Notes for cooks, bakers, stewards, and footmen lay in stacks on top of a larger file. I slid the papers carefully to the side, then began to

inspect the stack below it. More and more documents full of meaningless nonsense filled my view as I continued to dig deeper through the stacks. After exhausting the papers on the desk, I turned my attention to a wooden box underneath. When I lowered myself to the floor, I found that the crate was full of letters. *Perfect!* With one hand, I picked through the letters and with the other, I retrieved my letter from the hidden pocket in my skirt. I scanned over each letter rapidly reading the fine print. They were definitely application letters, but they were for more than just floral designers. There were probably a hundred of them crammed inside the box, and I had yet to come across Sapphira's handwriting.

I was beginning to fear that I was taking too much time when an unfamiliar noise made my entire body freeze. The distinct sound of the door handle turning alerted me that someone was entering the office. *This isn't good… How am I going to explain this?* In a panicked moment, I dropped my real application into the box of letters then bolted upright to my feet. Before I could step out from behind the desk, an older woman with gray hair pulled back in a tight bun stepped through the door. Her eyes fell on me instantly with a startled gasp.

"I beg your pardon," she said agape. "But may I ask what you're doing in my office?" She crossed her arms, clearly not ready to appeal to any sympathetic stories about me being lost.

Panic flooded over me as I fought to think of a valid excuse. *Maybe I can convince her that I am here for her?*

"Miss Prunella, right?" I smiled confidently, then stepped forward, summoning up all the proud social grace I had witnessed from Sapphira over the years. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Daisy. I had heard the palace was hiring floral designers for the prince's upcoming wedding." I plastered on a sophisticated smile while I desperately tried to sound authentic—and not like a crazy woman who just broke into a royal office.

"Yes, I'm Prunella. But why are you in my office? Any job requests were meant to be mailed in days ago," she asked slowly while simultaneously eyeing me down with a suspicious glare.

"Ah yes," I continued, crafting lies in my head as I went. "You see… I missed the deadline for the application—entirely my fault—but I didn't want to miss a chance to showcase my talents to you... in case you decided to make an exception." I lifted my arms and twirled around to showcase my dress. "This is the best example of my work I can offer you. I hope you can appreciate it." I swallowed back my nerves as the woman grazed her eyes over my dress.

"It's a lovely piece," the woman admitted while keeping a skeptical eye on me. "But I'm afraid this is an extremely improper way to go about the situation. I'll admit that you have exquisite talent but sneaking into my office in the midst of a party is more likely to land you a room in the dungeon, not a job." As the woman scolded me, I felt my stress build. *She wouldn't send me to the dungeon for this, would she?*

"A thousand apologies, madam." I lowered my lashes, feigning innocence. "It never occurred to me that I might make you uncomfortable. I can see now that I simply should have been diligent enough to send in my application in a timely manner." I put on a disappointed expression with wide eyes. *Maybe she'll believe I'm just dimwitted. That would be better than thinking I'm a thief, or worse.*

"Well, I'll have to report your presence here to the guards, but you should return to the ballroom at once," she said sternly, gesturing for the door. "Have a good evening, Miss Daisy."

"You as well, madam." I gave a slight respectful curtsey, then hurried out the door before she slammed it behind me, leaving me alone in the corridor.

*Well, that could have gone better...* I took slow, deep breaths, trying to calm my overworked nerves. The only thing I had accomplished was making matters worse. My real application was now

in the mix, but my false one was still there as well. *What would she do when she came across both? Would she believe that the false one was someone else's joke? Or would she throw out the real one as well when she read Sapphira's?* I had thrown Daisy's name into the mix now, too, so the king and prince would know I had snuck into the offices. Everything was a disaster.

I let out an exasperated breath. Maybe I just needed to tell Jasper the truth. All this scheming and planning to take back my life wasn't going anywhere, but maybe if Jasper believed me… I considered the likelihood of him believing the tale after Prunella informed the guards of my snooping. It would definitely be difficult to convince him, but he had always listened to me in my letters, so perhaps he would listen now as well.

With my dignity officially shattered, I hiked up my skirt and took the first step toward the ballroom. It wasn't going to be easy explaining this, but I wasn't going to accomplish anything by standing around and fretting. I strode past the king's office door with my eyes focused forward, then was immediately stunned by the door being thrown open into my side.

The heavy wood slammed into me, sending me to the floor. I shrieked from the startle, holding a hand to my freshly bruising hip. When I looked up at my offender, a chill ran down my spine. A dark pair of eyes stared down at me with terrible grimness. *It's the man from the ball who had been staring at me. What was he doing in the king's office?* I remained on the floor for a moment as I watched his face twist into disapproval.

"What in the realms are you doing here?" the man hissed. "You weren't supposed to leave the ballroom."

I climbed to my feet, my side still throbbing from the impact. "Stay in the ballroom? Sir, I don't believe we've ever spoken before?" I looked at him skeptically, an eerie feeling forming inside me.

"What do you mean, of course we—" He stopped, his eyes widening. "You're not her, are you?" He pointed at me, taking a step forward.

I stepped back subconsciously. "I'm not certain what you're referring to, sir…" The discomfort inside me grew, and I took another step back. *Something isn't right here.*

The man cursed under his breath as he reached for something in his jacket pocket. "The blasted wench had one job, and now I'm stuck cleaning up the mess." He groaned in annoyance, then pulled a polished dagger from his coat. The blade flashed the candlelight in front of my eyes, and I felt my blood run cold. *What is he doing? He couldn't possibly…* The man gave me a distant glare as he raised the dagger to his face, inspecting the point.

"It's a shame, really," he said coldly. "You could have lived if you had just stayed put."

My vision went black for a moment as I stumbled backward. The man lunged the dagger at me, and I missed the blade by mere inches as I crumpled to the floor. The man reacted quickly to my dodge and attempted to grab me by the hair. He managed to knock the pink rose free from my hair before I kicked him hard in the shin, sending him to the floor with me. Not wasting the chance, I scrambled to my feet and took off at a run down the hall. Footsteps rang out behind me as I heard him follow in quick pursuit. Terror constricted my throat, preventing me from screaming. I ran as fast as I could, but the speed was causing the flower petals to blow free, leaving an obvious trail for my murderous pursuer.

*What is going on!? Why is this man trying to kill me? Does it have something to do with this dress? With Camille?*

It was impossible to think through the situation while I was being chased by a man with a dagger. My mind shifted focus to survival. *If I can make it back to the ballroom, I can find help.* I don't know what I did to invoke this man's wrath, but I doubted he would be so willing to stab me in

front of an audience. I just had to keep running. The flowers held weight at the bottom of the dress, making it difficult to pick up my feet. I pushed my limbs to move faster as the man's running grew nearer. Fear ripped through me as I heard his huffing breaths. *Go faster, you're almost there*. I could see the doors now, they were the same ones I had entered the first time, but they were no longer attended by footmen. *Where did everyone go? Can I pull the doors open before the man catches up to me?*

Not certain of the answers, I pushed my feet to move faster, urging them to carry the weight of my gown at uncanny speeds.

"I wouldn't open those if I were you!" the man huffed viciously, only a few steps away.

I ignored his useless warning and desperately grasped at the giant copper knockers. With all my remaining strength, I heaved the doors open and threw them aside. I ran forward to the top of the steps, too breathless to call out for help. My lungs burned as I gasped in front of the gawking crowd. As I looked into the sea of faces, I noticed Jasper staring at me with deep concern.

I whipped my head around to check for my attacker, and saw him approach at a much more calculated canter. I sucked in a breath to call for help, but before I could make a sound, a hand clamped over my mouth. No one below me noticed, because at the same moment, a pained cry rattled the air.

It was from the king.

Thousands of faces turned white as we all looked up at the royal box seat. A younger, dark-eyed man stood there with a black mask covering the lower part of his face. And in front of him lay King Garrett.

With a sword pierced through his heart.

# chapter seventeen

"Father!" I screamed at the top of my lungs as I watched his life drain before my eyes.

Screams echoed throughout the ballroom as we all witnessed the horror unfold. The masked man pulled his sword cleanly from my father's lifeless body, and I felt the blood drain from my face as his eyes hinted at a wicked smile beneath his mask. He stared straight at me, his eyes darker than the night sky. I wanted to scream at him, wrap my hands around his throat and make him beg for mercy, but he disappeared behind the velvet curtains before I could even blink.

Every bit of my body felt as if it had been ripped apart and reattached with fire. Anger and pain seared through me with such vigor that my knees had buckled underneath me. *Who would do such a thing?! How did he get past the guards!? Why attack the king and not me!?* Tears burned behind my eyes as I stared into the empty eyes of my beloved father and king.

"No—" I choked out the words as chaos ensued around me. The guests ran wild in panic, while the guards formed a protective circle around me.

"Nobody leaves!" one of the guards shouted. "Lock the doors, gather all the men! Don't let him escape!"

The words floated through my mind like the haze of a nightmare. Pain twisted my stomach into knots as I felt the urge to scream again. Women and girls were crying from terror as the guards corralled them in the center of the room. The noise was almost deafening as the entire nobility mourned the loss of their ruler all at once. My body shook and trembled from the fury and shock that overwhelmed me.

*The king is dead.*

I forced my eyes to look back up to the box seat, but the space was already crawling with guards. *There's no sign of the murderer. How did he slip away so quickly?* I stood to my feet slowly, still feeling nauseated and unsteady. As I rose, a new strength filled me as I pictured the monster's eyes.

"Find him," I said to the nearest guard, my voice steel. "Find him, and anyone who may be associated with him, and bring them to me now." I took a step forward, commanding the guards to step aside from me with a single glare. "And get me a sword."

Within moments, the cluster of men broke away from me, joining the hunt for the killer. A sword was thrust into my hand by a faceless guard and I clutched the hilt so tightly my knuckles went white. My chest tightened with flooding grief, but I pushed it down for the time being. *I'm not going to let them get away with this.* As the guards spread out, I began to finally take in my surroundings. Most of the guests had been herded to the middle of the room, but a few remained at the top of the staircase. My eyes went wide as I focused in on the couple standing in front of the exit.

It was Daisy and another man who I had never met. Upon closer inspection, I saw that he, too, was wearing a mask, and he had a firm hold on her hand. Fear surged through me as I began to comprehend what I was seeing.

"Guards! Arrest that man!" I commanded over the stirring crowds.

My heart lurched as I noticed the absolute terror on Daisy's face. She looked as white as a ghost. I can't imagine how afraid she must be right now. I rushed forward behind a cluster of guards as they raced up the steps. The masked man instantly turned and fled out the doors, dragging Daisy by the arm behind him. Rage burned me alive as I forced my feet to climb faster. They had already taken my father from me, and I wasn't going to lose Daisy, too. As I reached the top step, I noticed the

guards had come to a halt. When I stepped forward to investigate their pause, I saw that the entry hall had been lit aflame.

Smoke billowed out from the doors as the rugs, curtains, and tapestry glowed red with heat. I shielded my mouth and nose from the smoke as I stared deeper into the flames. From the back of the room, I could barely see the swish of a flowered skirt spur around the corner. Without thinking, I tried to race forward into the flames, but one of my men caught me by the shoulder.

"No, Your Highness! It is far too dangerous. We need to douse the flames first." The man pulled me back as a group of guards stepped forward with large jugs of water from the banquet table.

"We don't have time for this!" I shouted in frustration. "The man is getting away, and Daisy is in danger!" I considered fighting through my guard, but they were all too focused on me. I was the only leader they had right now, and they weren't prepared to lose me, too.

As I impatiently waited for the flames to be smothered, the captain of the guard ran up the stairs to join us. I anxiously turned to him. He had been positioned on the exterior of the castle, so perhaps he had been able to apprehend those who escaped.

"Prince Jasper," the captain said breathlessly. "We were unable to capture the assailants, Your Highness. They were too well trained for our forces; five of our men have been struck down due to injury." His voice cracked for a moment, and I instantly felt the realms crash down upon me.

"What about the girl?" I asked desperately. "What happened to her? Is she still with them?" My eyes pleaded with the captain, and his face grew grim.

"Your Highness…" His face darkened. "The girl left *with* them."

My frustration and panic flooded over inside me, and I grabbed the captain by his collar. "Where!? Where did they go!? We need to follow them; we can't let them kidnap Daisy!" I shouted desperately, but his expression remained bleak.

"Your Highness... I don't believe the girl was kidnapped." I released his collar and backed away, horror filling my face. The captain straightened. "Moments before the attack, I received word that a girl by the name of Daisy, in a flower dress, was seen sneaking around the royal offices."

I felt my face go ashen. *When she stepped away… She couldn't have… She wouldn't…* My breaths ceased entirely for a moment as a new wave of sickly realization flooded over me. *All her letters… all the times she hinted toward something being off… Had she been associated with them all along?*

"No," I whispered in denial, "that can't be possible. It must be a misunderstanding. Daisy would never—" My words choked off as the pieces began to force themselves together in my mind.

"Your Highness, there's more,..." He looked at me with such sympathy that I nearly collapsed again. "We found solid evidence that she broke into the king's office."

My bare feet stung against the cold ground as the clock tower resonated its twelfth chime. The flaming palace rugs had scorched my exposed skin as the man dragged me through the fire. I desperately hunted for Pumpkin in the dark, looking for where the men claimed to have hidden her. I could almost still hear the twisted man's whisper ringing through my ear, along with the phantom sting of his blade in my back.

*"Don't make a sound. Just stay beside me until I drag you out the door. You only get to live if you cooperate."*

I hadn't had any other choice. My heart shattered at the sight of Jasper's desperate run toward me. I had wanted to run straight into his arms and cry with him over the loss of his father, but if I had so much as flinched, I would have been killed, too. Two other men in guard uniforms had set the entry

room on fire while we stood on the ballroom steps, and I was forced to run through the flames. Once we made it outside, we ran past at least five other masked men. They gave me confused looks, but we didn't slow down long enough for them to ask questions. Once we were far enough away from the palace, the man stopped, allowing me to catch my breath.

*"You listen here, missy. Your horse should be somewhere along the edge of the road here. Take him and go home, forget any of this ever happened, and no one will come slit your throat in the night, got it?"*

I ran frantically down the road, the memory sending tears down my cheeks. What *had I gotten involved with? Those men had just murdered the king, and somehow, some way, I was meant to be involved in it, but why? What was my purpose in this, and why let me live if they were vicious enough to kill in cold blood?* Pain followed my every step as I wandered aimlessly in the dark. The man must have been mistaken about where he left Pumpkin, because it took me hours of wandering to find her. It felt like I ran for miles before I finally heard the familiar whinny of my beloved mare.

The moment I approached the horse, I wrapped my arms around her snout, crying into her bristly hair. *Poor Jasper, I can't imagine what he's going through right now. If only I could have stayed and consoled him, or explained what I had witnessed. Maybe I could have helped.* With wobbling feet, I climbed onto Pumpkin's back and sent her running for home. Since I didn't have my cloak to cover me anymore, petals flew wildly off my dress, leaving a colorful trail for the wind to sweep up behind me. By the time we slowed in front of the estate, the dress looked almost as pitiful as it did the day I brought it home. Only about half of the petals remained, and those that stayed were beginning to wilt from the lack of water.

I pulled Pumpkin into the stable and clumsily dismounted. I barely managed to remove the horse's saddle and bridle before I found myself collapsing into a helpless pile on the stable floor. I cried for hours as the weight of the evening fell upon me. So much had happened in so little time. I had found my companion, and he was the prince. I had submitted my application, but I couldn't find the original. I had befriended the king, but he died before my eyes.

My tears lulled me to sleep, and before I knew it, the sun was peering at me through the stable window. When I roused to my senses, I remembered that I was still wearing the enchanted dress. Without wasting any more time, I leapt from the straw I was nestled in and ran around the back of the stable to where my clothes from the previous day had been stashed. It was a little difficult to unlace the dress myself, but after a few attempts, I managed to pull it off. Once I was fully dressed, I looked down at the gown that now sat pitifully in a lumpy pile. The flowers were definitely wilted, essentially symbolizing how the entire evening had played out. It had started off so bright and lively, but now all that remained had withered.

I wrapped the gown up in my arms and carried it to the trees behind the stable. One of the trees had a hollow opening at the base, so I stashed the dress inside for the meantime. I couldn't risk Sapphira finding it, especially now that she'd seen me dance with the prince in it. My heart lurched at the thought of the prince, and I felt my swollen eyes sting once more. I brushed the oncoming tears away as I searched the grounds for some familiar faces.

It didn't take long to locate the trio of gardeners. They were clustered around the remains of my garden, each keeping their head low. I ran up to them, watching their faces grow in surprise after seeing me.

"Beatrice, Yvette, Chester!" I threw myself onto the group, hugging them tightly. They squeezed me back but remained silent. I pulled back from the embrace and wiped at my eyes. "So much happened last night, I don't even know if I can explain it all."

Yvette looked at me with broken eyes. “Kalina, we heard about the king.” Her eyes misted over as Beatrice placed a consoling hand on her arm.

“I-I—” my words failed me as tears fell once more. “I saw him die.”

“Oh, Kali…” Chester wrapped me in a hug, and the ladies followed suit.

The three of us sat together in the grass as I quickly told them as much as I could. When I reached the part about the dark-eyed men, the group looked to each other with fearful expressions.

Beatrice grabbed my hands. “Kalina, are you certain you didn’t enter the king’s office?” Her eyes held me with severity, and I furrowed my brows.

“Yes, of course,” I confirmed. “I watched the man walk out of the office. He even hit me in the side with the door. I only entered the housekeeper’s office.” My confusion grew as the group’s faces grew more worried.

“Kalina,” Yvette spoke slowly, “reports have already been circling that a young girl named Daisy was involved in the attack on the crown and even confirmed to have broken into the king’s office.” Her eyes went wide as she explained.

“What? No...” I shook my head. “I never went into the king’s office, nor was I spotted there. Why would they confirm such a thing? There’s no evidence of it.” My disbelief fanned into panic as my friends looked around with fretful eyes.

“It’s because they did find evidence,” Chester said grimly, his gaze darting around now. “They found a scrap of fabric torn off on the corner of the king’s desk... lavender silk.”

I gasped, my face stripped of all color. *The dress had a tear in it when I received it… I had patched it up myself before Sapphira tossed it into the fire. Was that why the man was in the king’s office? He had told me I was meant to stay in the ballroom…*

“Kalina,” Beatrice said coldly, “you’re being framed.”

# chapter eighteen

"What was that?" Prince Conan seethed at his underling, gripping him tightly around the throat. "You said we could count on the girl, so *why* didn't she stay in the ballroom?" The prince eased his grip on the man's throat just long enough for the man to inhale a shaky breath.

"Forgive me, Your Highness," the older mage wheezed. "The girl I initially gave my enchantment to must have pawned off the job. The girl at the ball knew nothing about the plans, or even who I was. It couldn't have been her—"

The prince tightened his grip once more, cutting off the man's words. "Well that certainly is unfortunate for you, isn't it?" he growled. "The girl was meant to be arrested at the palace after they found the dress scrap and our planted guards accused her. But for some reason, you decided to let her run off into the city. Now, before I kill you, do you have any explanation for why you made such a foolish error?"

The prince released the man, who fell to the ground gasping. "I did it to aide you, Your Highness," the man said hastily between coughs. "Did you not see how the prince interacted with the girl? He cares for her, enough so that he nearly followed us through the fire. Once he believes that his love was involved with his father's murder, he will spare no effort to hunt her down for answers. If she had been arrested at the ball, he likely would have listened to her story, but with the influence of the nobility and the time it takes for the search to proceed, he'll be more likely to distrust her." The man moved to his knees, kneeling before his prince. "Your plan has not been thwarted, Your Highness... merely rearranged. The girl will still be blamed for the attack, and her lack of knowledge about our identities shall serve as protection. With no one to back up her claims and a true witness from the palace staff, the conviction should be swift and simple. We should still be able to cross the border during the commotion."

The prince tapped the tip of his sword against his chin, pondering the man's words. "It would seem you're neglecting a small problem," the prince stated coldly. "We don't know anything about the girl who was at the ball last night. Your enchantment has succeeded a little too well. It was intended to sway our selected victim to attend the ball without fear, but instead it allowed this newcomer to disappear seamlessly. Now we don't know if the prince will even be able to find her. If he can't locate the girl, then he'll likely look for *us* instead." He lowered his sword, pressing it to the man's cheek. "What shall we do about that, hmm?"

The man looked up at the prince, no concern reflecting in his eyes against the blade. "That's simple, Your Highness," he said coolly. "We go back to the wench I initially instructed the task to. She should know who received the dress."

The man remained stiff as the prince paused for an elongated moment, then finally pulled his blade away. "Very well then, let's test the validity of your plan," Prince Conan said starkly, sheathing his sword. "Looks like you and I have a little side trip to attend to."

I mounted Pumpkin in a flash, securing my bag around my shoulder. If the rumors were true, then the entire royal army would be searching for me, and I wasn't keen on letting Sapphira do the explaining. Somehow, some way, I had ended up being the fall girl for a murder plot against the king. If I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in the Drancos prison, I needed answers and allies.

Rearing Pumpkin's head, I spun the mare toward the entrance. Sapphira and the girls had pulled into the estate a few hours past dawn, likely having been held up by the guard most of the night.

Corliss was currently attempting to stall them for me long enough that I could escape. If news had spread to Sapphira about Daisy, then she would likely put the pieces together about where her living dress had come from. I tossed a ratty cloak over my shoulders, then turned to the three gardeners who were waiting to see me off.

"Deny any involvement you had," I told them sternly. "If they ask about the flowers, just say I made the dress on my own. I don't want to risk any of you getting dragged down with me."

"I ain't gonna lie to nobody," Beatrice huffed. "If they want the truth, they gonna get it. Yer innocent and I'm not gonna ignore that. I don't care who's toes I step on." She gritted her teeth, and I looked at her pleadingly.

"Beatrice, please," I begged. "You're all as innocent as I am. Don't let these villains take any more victims than necessary." I cast my gaze to Yvette and Chester, who nodded reluctantly.

"We'll keep quiet." Chester sighed. "If you're right about this prince, then we shouldn't have to keep our lips sealed for long."

I felt my heart grow heavy at the mention of Jasper. *Was I right about him? Would he believe my tale or even listen to it?* I tightened my grip around the reins. "I hope I'm right. He doesn't seem like the type to jump to conclusions, but he also just lost his father last night. It wouldn't be surprising if he decided to close me out entirely. I can only prove my innocence if he's willing to listen." Stress molded a knot in my stomach, and I noticed Sapphira move away from the rented coach. *I need to leave.*

"Go," Yvette said, reading my thoughts. "We'll do what we can here. Now hurry." She waved me off and I gave her a grateful smile as I flicked the reins.

Pumpkin took off at full speed, dashing straight past my dumbfounded stepmother. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her startle turn into fury as she shouted toward the rented coachmen. Fortunately, my head-start was too great for her to send a pursuer after me. Once the manor was out of sight, we slowed to a calmer trot in order to blend more seamlessly into the capital's crowd. As we passed through the town, I noticed the look of grief lingering in the eyes of the people. My heart sank at the memory of yesterday's events.

*The king is dead, and they know nothing about the culprit, other than they were in cahoots with a girl in a flowered dress.* My grip tightened on the reins as I instinctively dropped my head lower. I knew I couldn't be recognized since the dress's enchantment had protected my identity, but I likely didn't have long before Sapphira spread rumors that her disgrace of a stepdaughter had snuck into the ball. Pumpkin trotted smoothly along the road as my ear tuned into a few morsels of gossip.

"They say it was a woman," a stout baker murmured to his customer. "She ran the whole operation. Turns out, she was trying to make the prince fall in love with her so she could steal the throne after the king's death."

I bit my tongue, longing to detest the man's rumors. Another passerby chatted with her richly-dressed friends who walked alongside me.

"I watched it all happen," the girl squeaked. "The girl was beautiful, clearly intent on snagging the prince. Something must have gone wrong, though, because she ran off after the murder."

Her friend gasped. "I think I know why! My elder sister was there, too. She said that the guards were talking about a girl who broke into the king's office. Maybe she wasn't supposed to get caught and had to run."

"I bet she was looking for some top secret trade document or something!" a third girl said shrilly.

The group chattered more to themselves about the matter, and I pressed Pumpkin forward,

uninterested in the rest of their theorizing. Just when I thought I was free of the running mouths, a group of children ran in front of me, shouting and playing in the middle of the street.

"Do ya really think it was a girl!?" a young lad shouted.

"Uh-huh!" a round-faced girl chided back. "They even found some of her dress torn off in the king's special spot!" She smiled broadly as I carefully maneuvered Pumpkin around their antics.

"Girls are super tough!" another petite girl shouted as she ran out from behind me. "I hope she gets away!"

I pushed Pumpkin onward, leaving their comments well behind me. *The entire kingdom thinks I'm responsible.* I felt my breathing grow shallow as I realized the amount of danger I was currently in. *Those men… the real killers had somehow managed to convince all of Drancos that their plan relied on a helpless girl in a borrowed dress.* I swallowed, feeling sick to my stomach at the thought. *Who would do such a thing? To not only murder a kind and gentle ruler, but to blame an innocent?*

My memory flooded back to Camille. She *must have known… Or, at least, part of it.* All I knew for certain was that it wasn't an accident that she had received the dress. The men had clearly pinpointed me in it and even expected me to recognize them. She definitely had known more than she let on, and I was going to find out what. But first, I needed to do as much damage control as I could.

As I pulled Pumpkin into the palace garden, I took a quick glance around to inspect the surroundings. As expected, there were many more guards patrolling the grounds than normal, however, there were a lot more people, too. Dozens of citizens filled the walkways and benches, all mourning the loss of their king. My heart seized at the sight. I swung down from Pumpkin and tied her off to a tree. It was definitely risky to come here, but with so many people, and nobody knowing my true face, there wasn't much to fear.

As I approached my regular spot, a few nobles were already there, meandering around the flowers. Despite the crowds being helpful coverage for blending in, they were also a challenging obstacle. I needed to leave a letter, but I couldn't do it without looking a little suspicious. After waiting patiently and taking in the roses, a couple that occupied the bench stood to their feet and made their way to a different section of the gardens. Once they were gone, I took the opportunity to steal the seat and begin my letter.

I took out a piece of parchment and a pencil from my bag, but froze as I touched the graphite to the paper. *How am I supposed to say this?* There may not be a single word in the realms to convey the sorrow I felt for him or the desperation I had for him to believe me. This man cared for me—maybe even loved me—mere hours ago… but now he thought I had aided in his father's murder. *How can I expect him to hear me out after such a betrayal?* The honest answer was that I couldn't and I wouldn't blame him if he never looked at a flower for the rest of his life. But whether or not he wanted to believe it, I am innocent, and I'm not going to go down without attempting to clear my name. He may never care for me again, but maybe he'll at least let me live freely.

A tear slid down my cheek, splashing delicately at the top of my blank letter. I pressed a hand to my face, surprised by the unannounced emotion. *Had it really stung me that much to think he might never speak with me again?* Another tear formed in my eye, but I blinked it away. I had never imagined that I would fall in love, especially not with a prince. It was hard for me to know what love was, considering I had received very little of it since my father's passing. However, I had received love through friendship. All the servants who cared so greatly for me would do anything to protect me, and that was how they showed their love. Last night, when Jasper thought I was being kidnapped, he showed that same protective quality but stronger than I had ever seen. When we danced, he held me close, as if I were the most fragile creature. He had wanted to keep me safe, and that made me

long for him now that I wasn't.

I inhaled a shaky breath, trying to keep my emotions at bay. Jasper had been deceived just as I had been, and this was my only opportunity to explain that. I rubbed my eyes one more time for good measure, then pressed my pencil to the paper.

*Jasper,*

*I know how this all must look to you, but please hear me out. I never hurt your father, I never broke into his office, and I had never seen those men until the night of the ball. I understand that you probably won't believe a word I say, and I cannot blame you for feeling that way. Those men… they planned it all. I don't know who they are or where they are from, but they want you to think I was involved with them.*

*I wish I could explain the entire story to you now, but it's not safe for me to stay here. I'm going to look for answers, and when I have them, I will turn myself in. Until then, I have a request. Please allow me to prove my innocence.*

*My true name is Kalina Aristi. There is proof of my innocence at my family's estate. If you're willing, seek out my gardeners—Yvette, Beatrice, and Chester. They can lead you to the gown I wore the night of the ball. The proof is within it. I know this is asking far too much of you when I am in no position to do so, but I'm hoping you'll find it in your heart to believe me.*

I paused for a moment, considering my next words. It was likely that half of the guard would end up reading this note at some point, so I didn't want to say anything too personal. I began to sign my name, but then my traitorous heart stopped my pencil from moving. I sighed, then added on to the letter.

*And Jasper, I'm so sorry if I hurt you. I never knew any of this would happen, and I'm sorry I broke my promise to you. I really was looking forward to that dance.*

*Your Daisy,*

*Kalina Aristi*

I folded the letter gently, then sealed it into its envelope. With a cautious eye, I tucked my note into its chosen spot beneath the flowers. None of the lingering guards or nobles seemed to notice me make the placement, so I allowed myself to relax slightly.

Returning to Pumpkin, I mounted the mare and clicked her into a trot. *That was it. I had done all I could with Jasper. Now it was up to him whether or not he deemed me worth trusting.* My chest tightened, but I tried to ignore it. I had something else to focus on now. Pumpkin and I wandered through town for another few minutes until my eyes fell upon the half-rotted tavern.

*The Godmother's Brew*

I dismounted Pumpkin, then started for the door. If there was a chance that the prince wouldn't believe me, then I would just have to track down the real culprits.

# chapter nineteen

The tavern was even emptier than it had been on my first visit. It might have had something to do with the "closed" sign on the door, but I didn't have the patience to deal with the technicality. As I burst through the door, the sole person in the dingy space shot her eyes to me. The barmaid's face instantly grew alarmed as I quickly closed the distance between us. I was only a few feet from her when she shook off her startle and pulled a kitchen knife from her pocket.

"Stay back!" Camille commanded fiercely.

I froze, raising my hands in surrender. I hadn't expected her to be armed.

"Camille," I began, my tone much softer than I had originally intended, "I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to talk."

Her eyes narrowed and she lowered the knife. "I ain't got time to talk," she hissed, turning her attention to a half-packed bag on the counter. "I gotta get out of 'ere." She stuffed some miscellaneous items into the bag, then turned to the kitchen to collect more.

I followed behind her. "You're running?" I questioned, peering at the loaded bag. *This is unexpected*... I had assumed she was involved with the plot against the king. Why would she be trying to flee?

"As fast as I can," she confirmed while stuffing food rations into a burlap pouch. "Ya should, too. I never knew what I was getting myself into, and I'm sorry I dragged ya into this... but I ain't sticking around to die."

*Die?*

She rushed back to the dining space to add to her pack, but I stood in front of the door, blocking the exit.

"Move!" she demanded, her voice quivering a little nervously. "I need to leave. Now!"

"Not until you tell me what's going on." I stared her down boldly, trying to convince her I wouldn't be easily moved. "Who were those men? How did you get that dress? And what did you neglect to tell me the night we met? You're not the only one who's in trouble, Camille."

We both held each other's glares in a silent stand off for a moment, before Camille finally cracked.

"Alright! I'll tell ya, but ya gotta let me pack while I talk." I nodded, then stepped aside. She instantly rushed out the door, rattling off the story as she worked. "It happened a little over a week ago. This man, an enchanter, with brown and silver hair, came into the tavern and asked how business was going. Well, it wasn't going well, so I was honest. I'm in a lot of debt after Pa left us, so I was hopeful that this guy would want to offer me a job, and he did." She stuffed the rations into her bag, then hurried back behind the counter.

"What kind of job?"

"The easy, well-paying kind." She shrugged. "All I had to do was show up at the ball in a fancy dress and dance with the prince. If I did that and stayed in the ballroom, then he would give me enough money to pay off my debts and more." She let out a frustrated sigh. "I was skeptical, of course; it seemed too good to be true, and it definitely was. The man said he couldn't get me an invitation, and I would have to sneak into the ball on my own. I wasn't willing to go to prison, so I refused the offer, but then he sweetened the deal. He told me that the dress could conceal my identity, so if I was spotted, nobody would know it was me. I would still have to sneak in, but he claimed he knew a guard who would turn a blind eye at the eastern servant's entrance. I knew it was risky…"

She paused, picking up a heavy pouch that was hidden beneath the counter. She looked inside of the bag and sighed again, then showed me the contents. I gasped. It was stuffed full of gold coins—it had to be enough money to buy a small property at least.

"He paid half up-front." She cinched the bag closed, then walked it over to her luggage.

"That's only half!?" I said in a baffled voice. Not even Sapphira had that kind of money handy.

"Like I said, they paid well." Camille shrugged, adding the pouch. "So anyway, I agreed. There weren't many other options for me other than go bankrupt. I saw an opportunity to make things better for me and my ma, but I didn't think about the consequences…" She lowered her head.

"So, they paid you to wear the enchanted dress to the ball?" I summarized. "If that was all you had to do, then why did you give the dress to me?"

Her face twisted into a guilty expression. "I didn't know what was gonna happen." She turned her face from me, unable to look me in the eye. "I was nervous about breaking into the castle—even with the enchanted dress, there was still a chance I could get caught. So when ya came around with an invitation and a motive to attend… I don't know, it just seemed like the safer option.

A touch of anger trickled through my veins. "So you're telling me… that you accepted a sleazy deal with a stranger, who handed you a suspicious amount of coinage, then pawned off the dangerous part of the job to an unsuspecting girl while you collected the money?!" I ranted off the accusations, feeling far less sympathy than she wanted me to.

"Hey, ya better watch yourself! I was still doing ya a favor!" She pointed an accusing finger at me. "Ya still got to go to the ball, right? And ya got to go in without yer family knowing ya were there. If I hadn't given ya that dress, ya never would have even gone!"

"If I hadn't gone, then I wouldn't be accused of murder right now!" I shouted, my anger bubbling over. "Camille, the king is *dead*. That dress you gave me was part of a set-up. The fabric that was torn off the bottom was found in the king's office. They wanted you to take the fall for their crime, but now it's landed on me!"

"I know… I heard about that." Camille bit her lip. "That's why I need to get out of here right away. Ya weren't arrested last night, which means that the people who planned this probably see me as a loose end. If I stick around for much longer, they are either gonna send the guard after me or silence me themselves." She gulped.

"Camille…" My thoughts came out slowly as I pondered her words. "I don't think they're going to send any guards after you."

"Why wouldn't they? It's not as if they could recognize ya in that dress. The culprits must still believe it was me last night. As long as ya didn't tell anybody about yer trip to the king's unplanned funeral, ya should be free and clear."

I pressed my hands against my legs, trying to vent my frustrations. "No, Camille, I am not free. My family likely already figured out I was the girl at the ball, and the men recognized that I wasn't you last night."

She dropped her bag, her eyes going wide. "What do ya mean? How could they have known? The magic…"

"Doesn't matter if they talked directly to me," I finished. "One of the men scolded me for not staying in the ballroom when I went to swap out my application. When I didn't know what he was talking about, he pulled a dagger on me and nearly killed me." I shuddered, recalling the terrifying incident.

"Oh no…" Camille murmured to herself. "If they know that I didn't go, then they are sure to come after me! We gotta run, now!" She picked her bag off the floor, then grabbed me by the arm with

her free hand, dragging me behind her.

"Camille, wait!" I halted. "Running won't solve anything. If they want us dead, then they will find a way to track us down. Plus, they would have killed me last night if they really wanted to. Our best option is to go to the castle and report everything we know to the guard."

Her expression showed little compliance toward the idea. "Are you kidding me?!" she shouted. "We can't go to the crown! They'll throw us in prison to rot for the rest of our lives, or maybe worse!" She shivered and I tried to push the thought away in my mind as well.

"Maybe, but there's a chance they'll hear out our story," I explained hastily. "The prince and I were… acquainted before his father died. I have already left him a message explaining that I can prove my innocence. There's a chance he'll look into my claim and perhaps even spare us any sentence. If we surrender ourselves to the guards, we can at least be certain we'll be out of reach from the men who are after us." I looked at her pleadingly. "Please, Camille, if you come with me and share your story, then we have a better chance of being free of this nightmare."

She eyed me down with skepticism, then stuck her chin up in the air. "Not happening," she stated bleakly. "I'm not risking my life based on yer apparent trust in a pretty-eyed prince. I've got enough money to leave this blasted city. I'm heading for the countryside where I can buy a new tavern and start over." She pulled away from my gaze, then started for the door.

"What about your mother!" I called to her. "Are you going to leave her here to deal with the men alone?"

"She can take care of herself." Camille stopped with her hand just above the doorknob. "I left her some money and a note. She had no involvement with the deal I made, so I doubt the men will do her any harm. If she wants to run, then she can, but I doubt she'll want to leave the capital. There are too many rich men here for her to mooch from." I watched her eyes roll from the side of her face. Apparently appealing to her sympathetic side wasn't going to work.

"What about me then?" I asked. "You're just going to leave me to face the judgment of the crown alone? With no witnesses to back up my story?" My eyes pleaded with her. *If she leaves, then I have no other evidence toward my innocence. Would the dress be enough to prove I was framed?*

She sighed, then turned to face me. "Listen, girlie, yer real sweet and all, but I think it's time ya grew up." Her tone was similar to the one I had heard many times from my stepfamily, cold and judgmental. "If ya wanna go be a brave idiot and get yerself arrested, then go ahead, but I'm gonna tell ya now that this ain't no fairy tale. Your prince isn't gonna save ya, and those men aren't likely to let ya frolic home again. If ya want to run, then come with me. Ya can work in my new tavern, just like we talked about. I can promise ya won't get any better offers." Her eyes darkened as she spoke, and I felt the weight of her words sink heavily on my heart.

*It's not true. I can still get out of this. I can still be with Jasper. He just has to hear me out…*

My throat tightened as I felt a wash of unwanted emotions rise up. *But what if she's right? Would Jasper never believe me? Was I truly better off running away and starting over?* I looked over to the tempting invitation of freedom that lingered by the door, then took a deep breath. My toe twitched forward to take a step, but my heart reined it in before I could make the movement.

*No, this isn't over yet. I still have one more card to play.* I planted my feet firmly on the ground, then looked up into Camille's distant glare.

"I'm staying," I said rigidly. "I will fix this, and I will clear both of our names. I may be foolish, but I'm still going to be brave and stand for what's right and true. I refuse to let anyone steal my life away from me anymore."

I looked boldly to Camille, who was now looking to me with a more sympathetic gaze than before. “If that’s how ya want it to be, girlie, then I wish ya luck.” She gave me a half-smile before she turned to open the door.

My heart pounded rapidly as I recognized the situation I had committed myself to. This wasn’t going to be easy, and I could very likely end up spending my life regretting this moment from a prison cell. Yet, I was proud of myself. I was proud that I had stood up for what was mine, and that I had convinced myself that my life was worth fighting for. I almost began to smile at the thought of my self-accomplishment, but any feeling of joy was swept away the moment Camille opened the door.

A scream penetrated the air as Camille fell limply to the ground. I threw my hands over my mouth in terrified horror as blood pooled from her right side. My vision clouded at the sight and I felt nauseated from the sound of her gasping breaths.

When my vision cleared, I finally took notice of the two dark-eyed men who stood in the tavern’s doorway. I recognized them both instantly. One was the older man who had attacked me at the ball, except instead of a cap, he now displayed his brown and silver hair, and the man beside him… My legs shook as I caught sight of the bloodied dagger in the younger man’s grip.

“You…” I could barely mutter the word as I stared into his dark, soulless eyes. “You’re the man who killed the king.” My hand shook violently as I pointed at the villain.

He flashed me a wicked smile. “And you must be the young lady who nearly messed it all up.” He leaned down, picking up Camille by the hair. She cried out in pain and I winced. “Pleasure to meet you, Daisy. Let’s all take a walk, shall we?”

# chapter twenty

"Still no official leads, Your Highness," Captain Orion explained dismally.

I pressed my fingers against my brow, my mind clouded and heavy. "Have we investigated all the claims yet? Even the minor ones, likely to be false?" I looked up at him expectantly.

"Not yet, Your Highness." He shook his head, his eyelids drooping slightly. "There have been far too many for the guards to keep up with. I understand your reasoning behind putting a bounty on the girl's capture, but I'm afraid it has not had the effect we were hoping for."

The captain must be as exhausted as I was. Neither of us had slept a wink since the morning of the ball. The rest of the evening had been filled with the chaos of searching as we tried to find even the smallest clue to the identity of Father's killers. My blood ran cold at the mental image of the man's blade in my father's chest. There was no time for sleep while he was still running loose.

"I understand, captain, but please, continue to investigate them. Hopefully one of the leads will have an ounce of truth." I sunk into the nearest arm chair, attempting to rest my weary bones for even a moment.

Almost immediately after the guests were cleared to leave the castle, a notice was sent out that the girl known as Daisy was wanted by the crown. We had offered a hefty reward for anyone who could disclose her whereabouts, but unfortunately, we ended up attracting a bit more confessions than we had intended. For some odd reason, we couldn't concoct an accurate description of the girl for any of the announcements. No matter how many times I reflected on our time at the ball, I couldn't remember any semblance of her physical appearance. I knew she had brown eyes from our initial meeting in the garden, but other than that, I could recall nothing. Her hair color, skin tone, height, build, all of it was blank. Because of our lack of description, it seemed that half the kingdom suddenly had a villainous, brown-eyed servant who had attended the ball. The thrill of a royal pay sum, and the title of heroic citizen, had appealed a little too greatly to the kingdom. Unfortunately, I didn't know enough of Daisy's characteristics to narrow down the search. The only memory I had of Daisy's appearance from the ball was how beautiful she was to me—and not necessarily because of her appearance, but because of who she was.

Pain seared through my heart at the memory of our time together. *It had all been a ploy… She had been using me from the start, likely even from our first meeting.* The thoughts pricked painfully at my mind as I thought through all the letters we had exchanged. *Had that really all been an act?* I would have never believed it if the proof wasn't directly in front of me. Inches away from me, on my father's desk, sat the small strip of lavender silk, identical to the dress Daisy had worn. Despite my faulty memory, I was certain of her dress. It had been utterly unforgettable, and every guest in attendance could recall it too, despite not remembering her features. I stared at the scrap of fabric with a broken gaze, unsure how to answer the questions that stung at my mind.

*Why had she done it? What was she doing in my father's office?*

Nothing was discovered to be missing in the space, so we had yet to theorize why she had been in here. The head housekeeper, Prunella, had officially sighted her in her office as well, but we had assumed that she wandered in there by mistake while intending to find the king's office. There was a great deal of theorizing behind it, but that was the only thing that made sense.

Daisy had excused herself from me immediately after meeting my father, and she even knew where he was going to be after he announced that he would return to his box seat. After her departure, she was spotted in the housekeeper's office, and then appeared at the ballroom in time to watch my

father die. The timeline, the witness, and the evidence all lined up to her being up to misdeeds. As much as it hurt to admit, there was no logical explanation to her being innocent.

*Except for her eyes…*

My mind flashed back to the image of her standing atop the staircase with the man gripping her hand. *She had looked so scared then…* And not the type of scared that came with guilt, but the fear that only stemmed from the unknown. She appeared so honestly shocked that I couldn't let go of the thread of hope that she may not have wanted this to happen. Unfortunately, her sudden disappearance wasn't helping her case. The official announcement that she was wanted for the crown's custody had offered her plenty of time to surrender, and the innocent didn't run.

*Unless she couldn't surrender…*

"Do you have any other orders sir?" the captain asked stiffly.

"No, that is all for now," I said with a sigh. "Please inform the guard of my commands, then get some rest. If we receive any solid leads, I'll need you at your best, so please care for yourself in the meantime."

He opened his mouth as if to protest that he was fine, but a yawn overtook him almost the instant he tried to speak. I raised an eyebrow at him, challenging him to debate my order, and he simply bowed.

"As you wish, Your Highness."

As he began to gather his belongings from the office, I dug into my mind for any solid memories of Daisy's appearance. It was beyond strange. The entire ballroom had laid eyes upon her, yet no one could describe her. I had held her only inches from my face, yet when I tried to imagine her eyes, I could only picture the girl covered in mud. I sunk deeper into the chair with a frustrated groan, earning a skeptical side-eye from the retreating captain. My head ran through the evening step-by-step, trying to remember any clues that would aide us.

We already knew she liked flowers, so the guard was focusing on confessions from families who had enough land to grow a substantial flower patch. I knew she had a proper education due to our letters, but that extended even past the nobility. I pressed my thumb into my forehead as if I could squeeze out more information, but instead, I found myself daydreaming about our time on the dance floor. It stung to recall the memories, but at the same time, the feeling of her wrapped tightly in my arms still brought me calm. *I had loved her, I truly had, and now… I just needed answers.*

I sat up a little straighter as Captain Orion finally stepped out the door, my thoughts played through the steps of our dance one final time, and suddenly, I jumped.

"Captain, wait!" I nearly shouted as I sprang up out of my chair. The man quickly turned back into the room with a confused startle.

His mind was definitely too exhausted to process the situation. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"I have another piece of information to share with the guards," I explained a little calmer. "Daisy never had shoes on when I met her—both at the garden and at the ball. She was barefoot both times."

The captain's face contorted into a puzzled look. "Is that so?" He pressed a hand to his tired chin. "Very well, then. I think I know how this information could be beneficial. We will tell the guards to ask each of the families what type of shoe their surrendered servant wore to the ball. If they give us a straight answer, then we'll know they are lying." He lowered his hand from his chin with a pleased expression crossing his face.

"That should work splendidly," I confirmed. "I doubt anyone else noticed her lack of footwear, and no one would expect a young lady to forgo shoes in a ballroom. This fact should be just bizarre enough that no one will think to fabricate it." A sense of comfort washed over me. *This could*

*certainly expedite the process.*

"Consider it done, Your Highness." The captain bowed, then left to inform his men, leaving me alone in my father's empty office.

I sank back into the familiar armchair with an uneasy sigh, trying to block out the grief that chewed at my heart. There would be a time to mourn, but first, I needed to avenge my father. No matter what feelings I still harbored for Daisy, I couldn't let them get in the way of giving my father the justice he deserved. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes for a brief moment.

As the soft leather enveloped me, a brief moment turned into a long, exhausted nap. When my eyes finally peeled open, Marlon was standing above me with his usual stoic expression. I bolted upright in my chair at the sight of his unexpected presence, while simultaneously wiping a trail of drool off my chin. The messenger paid no mind to my sloppy state, but instead, calmly presented me with a letter. I narrowed my tired eyes on the envelope, and nearly passed out again when I recognized the handwriting.

"Is that from—" I stared at the note as a swirl of emotions ripped through me.

"It was in the usual spot sir, underneath a daisy."

*Daisy…*

I quickly accepted the letter, but I couldn't find the willpower to open it. *This might be a message from my father's murderer…* My chest tightened as I considered the possibility. *This could very well be her way of gloating, or perhaps even a new threat*. My grip tightened on the fragile paper as I felt my previous anger stir. My mind battled as I debated opening it or burning it. Marlon watched with a curious eye as I withheld from opening the note.

"Your Highness," the man said calmly.

I looked up from the clenched paper, nearly forgetting he was still there. "Yes, Marlon? Was there something else?" I asked with a distant tone, my gaze still fixated on the letter.

"Nothing terribly important but…" The typically emotionless man let out an audible sigh. "If I may be so bold, I would like to recommend that you read the note with an open mind."

I shot my attention to Marlon, but his expression was already stark again. "Oh? And why might you feel inclined to recommend such a thing?"

"You see, Your Highness, I saw the girl leave her note," he stated smoothly. My eyes widened, but he continued before I could question him further. "The girl was clearly distraught and even shed tears. It didn't seem like the actions of a manipulative accomplice to murder. She must have snuck the note into the garden while my back was turned, because I didn't realize she was Daisy until I noticed the letter hours later. It was the same envelope though, so I'm certain it was her."

I stared at him in disbelief for a moment. *He had seen her, she was here, and she was crying. Was it from guilt? Did she regret the choices she had made?* My heart twisted and squeezed in my chest, uncertain of how to process this new piece of information.

"I shall report what I recall of her appearance to the guard now that I have informed you," Marlon said with a bow. "Thank you for your time, Your Highness." He swept out of the room without so much as a backward glance, leaving me with a mass of questions and one very heavy envelope.

I took a deep breath, then gently pulled the letter open. My hands shook from both nerves and adrenaline as I skimmed across the page. With each line, I felt my heart wind a little tighter with newfound emotion. By the time I reached the end of the letter, I found my eyes lingering on the name at the bottom of the page.

*Kalina Aristi.*

I read the name over and over, as if practicing it in my mind. *This is her. This was the Daisy*

*—or the Kalina—who had stolen my heart so many weeks ago. If what she said was true… then she wasn't involved with the attack, and she's in trouble.* I read the words over again, my mind fighting with me to sort out logic from my emotions. As much as I wanted to believe Kalina's innocence, there was far too much evidence against her. *Could this all be a farce? Is she planning a trap at the Aristi estate? Or maybe she's trying to push the blame onto some other unsuspecting girl?*

I stood from my chair, my bones creaking from my stiff nap earlier. My feet skirted across the floor as I paced circles around the vacant office. *She said the evidence of her innocence was in her dress… What could that possibly mean? Had she hidden something inside it? Or perhaps she referred to the dress itself?*

I inspected the note once more, then remembered what Marlon had said. *It was under a daisy…* This was an odd time to reference new beginnings, but she could have merely used the flower as a nod to her identity. Although… she had never neglected the opportunity to display her knowledge of flowers before… *What else did a daisy mean?* I wracked my brain for answers, thinking through the meanings behind the simplistic bloom. My eyes widened as I recalled the most obvious answer.

*Innocence…*

My thoughts tumbled around in my head when a sudden idea struck me. I summoned the nearest guard, who came quickly to my call.

"Tell me, have any confessions or information regarding Daisy come from the Aristi family?" I asked thoughtfully.

The guard paused for a moment to think through the reports, then nodded. "I believe so, Your Highness. If I'm not mistaken, Madam Sapphira Aristi attempted to report her stepdaughter this morning. We plan to investigate, but have been pursuing the more likely reports first."

"I understand," I nodded, "however, there has now been a change of plans. The Aristi household is now our first priority. Please wake the captain and inform him that I shall be attending to this investigation personally."

"Right away, Your Highness," the guard said with a prompt bow.

The moment he left the room, I exited behind him, rushing to my chambers. I was still wearing the gaudy attire from the ball and wanted to change into something a little less flashy before riding into the city. After I was dressed, I met up with the captain by the doors of the palace.

"Your Highness, may I ask why the Aristi household is so important all of a sudden?" the captain asked with a resounding yawn.

I placed the letter in his hands without a word, then threw on my cloak. As I fastened the strap, I watched the captain's expression morph into astonishment as he read through the lines. By the time he finally looked up at me, my boots and cloak were both secure, and I looked to him with impatience.

"Shall we be off, captain?" I badgered with an ounce of humor.

The captain nodded swiftly. "Lead the way, Your Highness."

# chapter twenty-one

The gag in my mouth tasted vile. My hands and feet were bound in front of me by coarse ropes, but at least my eyes were uncovered. Although, part of me wished that they had blindfolded me whenever I looked down at Camille's pale face. They hadn't bothered tying her up since she was too weak to move from her injury. The two us sat in the back of a covered caravan, with six other men seated between us and the exit. One of the men was the all-too-familiar mage who I now had the displeasure of meeting both at the ball and the tavern. The other five men were completely new, but I thought I recognized a few of them as the fake guards who lit the palace on fire. Either way, they all held the same distasteful scorn in their eyes whenever they looked at Camille and me.

I tried not to look them in the eyes, but the only other place for my gaze to go was Camille's pain-twisted face. Though they hadn't bound her, they still stuffed a gag in her mouth. Her muffled cries of pain pressed against her gag each time the caravan hit a significant bump. I winced each time the wagon jolted, feeling sympathetic toward her pain. The patch of red on her side had covered the entire left half of her dress. The men had given her a rag to press against the wound, but it didn't seem to help much when she had to apply the pressure herself.

Her eyes occasionally rolled back into her head as she fell in and out of consciousness. Every time she faded away, I grew terrified she wouldn't reawaken. Fortunately, she was stronger than she looked, and each time her eyes fluttered open, she used her dwindling strength to press against the wound.

I would've screamed at the men to help her if I could, but the foul-tasting rag in my mouth prevented me from uttering a word. If only they would let me help her. She couldn't last like this forever, and soon, she would be out of strength entirely. Her tired eyes caught mine for a moment, a look of desperation searing through them before they rolled back in her head once more. I kicked at my restraints, trying to catch the men's attention. She was dying, and I had to do something.

My kicking caused two of the men to turn their heads for a moment. The first one only sneered at me, but the second grew irritated enough that he gifted me with his focus.

"Eh! Keep it down over there," the man hissed in a stern whisper.

I looked him dead in the eye and stamped my foot even louder. This may have been the absolute dumbest time to be brave, but there was a life on the line, and I didn't have time to consider the consequences.

The other men turned their eyes toward me, and the enchanter leaned forward. "You better cut that out, you little petal princess, or you'll be looking like your friend here." He gestured at Camille's limp body.

I held his glare with my own, then stomped once more while screaming as hard as I could into my gag. If they were going to kill me, they would have done so already—or, at least, that was what I tried to convince myself.

"You! Shut her up!" one of the other men commanded to the enchanter.

With an irritated growl, he scurried over to me and flashed a dagger in front of my eyes. My body stiffened for a moment as I recognized it to be the same blade from the night of the ball. The memory of his attempted attack swept my courage away for a moment. I looked at Camille out of the corner of my vision once more, trying to gather all the bravery I required to help her.

The man raised the dagger to my neck. "I've had enough of your games. This is your last warning," he seethed, taunting me with the blade.

It looked like he was trying to intimidate me, while simultaneously keeping me unharmed. He gently brushed the blade up my neck and to the side of my cheek, attempting to frighten me with its silver glint. To his credit, it definitely worked. I was no trained assassin or spy, so despite feeling confident that he wouldn't hurt me, I still quivered at the feel of the steel's edge. When he noticed my fear, a villainous smile crept up his face, followed by a low chuckle.

His amusement sent a rush of anger through me, nullifying the terror within. *How dare he laugh at a time like this!?* His laughter distracted him for a moment, and he let the blade linger against where the gag was secured across my jaw. In an instant, an idea flashed into my mind. Before I could think it over, I leaned my face into the side of his blade. The sharp edge instantly severed half-way through the gag, while simultaneously slicing a shallow cut into my cheek. I ignored the sharp sting as I took advantage of the lessened tension of the gag and spit it out of my mouth.

The enchanter's eyes went wild as he tried to comprehend what had just occurred. Before he could process my actions, I let out a deafening scream. Every eye turned to me as the entire caravan pulled to a stop. I sucked in a breath to scream again, but the enchanter's hand clamped over my mouth before I could.

"What part of 'shut her up' did you not understand!?" one of the men roared.

"The blasted wench shoved her face into my blade!" the enchanter hissed. "How in the realms was I supposed to predict that!?"

The group began bickering amongst themselves, and I took the opportunity to bite down on the enchanter's hand. He yelped in pain as he pulled away, and I noticed that his hand was red with the blood from my scratch.

Instead of screaming, I used my opportunity to speak. "Let me help Camille!" I shouted defiantly.

The men quieted for a moment. I thought it was due to my demand, but it was the entrance of another presence that had caused the eerie silence. The dark-eyed man—the younger man who had stabbed the king—approached me with a disdainful look.

"You're hardly in the position to be making requests, little Daisy," the man said coolly, his dark glare sending shivers down my spine.

I mustered all the confidence I could as I matched his stare. "You need me alive, do you not? Likely to take the fall for your crimes."

His eyes narrowed. "What I may, or may not need you for, is not your concern. You should consider yourself lucky that the only blood you have lost thus far has been caused by your own actions. My plans can work just as easily with your corpse, so if you want to try something cute, be my guest." His smooth voice held a daunting quality to it as his perfect teeth spread into a devilish grin.

"But, Your Highness…" the enchanter whispered behind his boss, "if she dies, then…"

My eyes widened at the man's words. At the same time, his boss turned back and stabbed him in the heart. I shrieked in both terror and shock as the man crumpled lifelessly to the floor. The action happened so quickly, I had barely even taken a breath between the man's final words and his fatal fall. The dark-eyed murderer quickly looked back at me, a new flash of panic staining his previously collected expression. The enchanter died because he let a valuable piece of information slip, but I had caught it before the man could silence him.

"Your Highness?" I questioned shakily, my adrenaline still racing after watching a second man die in the last day. "You're clearly not from Drancos or Isalla, and Sybettal no longer has a royal lineage… You're one of the three princes from Ashbourne, aren't you?" I let my thoughts spill out

before I could even consider containing them.

The foreign prince's face raged with fury as he closed the distance between us. "It would seem that you have sealed your fate, dear Daisy," he hissed in my ear. He was so close to me that I could almost feel the heat of his anger seething off him.

"You see, I was going to let you live," he continued, a sadistic smile now spanning his face. "We were going to dump you and your friend here at the edge of the woods, then alert the guard of your location. I figured by the time they arrived, the little bar rat would be freshly deceased, and you would have a second murder to add to your trial. But now that you know my little secret…" he placed his fingers lightly around my throat, and while he didn't squeeze, the threat was clear, "I suppose we'll have to make a change of plans."

He placed the slightest pressure on my throat, just enough to block my airway, then released it only a moment later. I gasped, despite it being a short suffocation. The prince darted his eyes over to the dead enchanter and the barely conscious Camille.

"Dump those two," the prince commanded sharply. "We're going to have a change in destination, and we'll need to make haste. The dead weight will only slow us down, so just toss them out the back."

"No!" I gasped. "Please, I beg of you. At least drop Camille off in a town. She's too senseless to remember anything you've said, and she was already planning to run before you caught us. She won't say a word; just give her a chance to live. I beg of you." I knew I sounded desperate, but I couldn't help but plead.

"Why should I bother?" the prince scoffed. "She may not cause me any harm, but what benefit do I gain in sparing her life? It seems to me that she does me the most good by lying on the side of the road." His berating tone stirred up a fire in me, summoning a fresh lie into my mind.

"If you don't leave her with a doctor, then I can promise you won't ever make it out of this kingdom." I forced every bit of ferocity I felt into my lie, but the prince only rolled his eyes. I glared at him intensely. "You may know me as Daisy, but do you know my real name? Do you know what connections I possess? What power my family holds?"

That got his attention. He remained straight-faced, but I noticed the slightest twitch in his eye.

"How do you think I received an invitation to the ball in the first place?" I smirked. "I certainly didn't have to sneak in like you all did." I played my voice up a little more pompously, hoping with every ounce of my being that my demeanor appeared confident.

The prince gritted his teeth. "To which family do you stem from, dearest Daisy?"

*Got him.*

"I will tell you, *after* Camille is safely deposited at a village with a proper doctor," I bartered boldly. "If you know my family's name, then perhaps you'll have enough time to spin more rumors of their involvement or even silence them. I can at least admit that they don't care much for me, hence why I had to attend the ball alone and unseen. However, I am very valuable to them, since I can easily affect their standing in court. They will gladly fight with all their wealth to clear their names if your plan succeeds."

I watched with spastic heartbeats as the men looked nervously between each other. Their prince, on the other hand, appeared more relaxed, though his hands were balled into fists. "A very tempting deal, but I think you're missing a piece of leverage," the prince said calmly. "No one at the ball knew who you were, so they likely won't discover Daisy's true identity until your body is recovered. I should have plenty of time to cross the border between your death and their vengeance." He graced me with his wicked smile once more, and I felt my body tighten.

I cast a glance over at Camille and felt the blood drain from my face. She was still breathing, but she was so pale… My mind searched for another way out, but it kept coming up blank… *Think Kalina! Thin—*

"The prince!" I spouted the word abruptly, earning a couple of odd stares. "The prince, Prince Jasper, already knows my true identity." I watched as a few of the men began to snicker or roll their eyes. All of them seemed to find the idea of me knowing Jasper humorous, except for the prince before me, whose eyes widened. He had seen me at the ball with Jasper and understood the likelihood of him knowing my identity.

"The prince believes you murdered his father," the prince stated, a little more flustered than before. "Even if you two were cordial, he won't believe your family's statements after what he saw."

My eyes darkened, my confidence no longer feigned. "He'll believe them," I said proudly. "He loves me, and I love him. And if there was any doubt in his mind, I left him a note explaining my entire situation." I watched as the Ashbourne prince searched my eyes for any lies, but I had none for him to find. The love Jasper had shown me was real, and I couldn't keep denying the truth that I loved him, too. He would believe me. He had to, for the sake of his father and kingdom.

The prince stayed silent, then turned his back to me. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear him whisper some huffed words to his men. Without any further correspondence with me, the prince leapt out of the back of the caravan. Moments after he left, the caravan began moving again and the men kept passing me irritated glares. Their angered looks encouraged me that I might have been successful, but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

As we rolled along, I kept my eyes trained on Camille, counting the seconds between her breaths. My heart sank every time the spacing between her breaths grew longer. *Just hold on Camille…* She shut her eyes once again, just as the caravan came to a stop. My pulse quickened as I heard the sounds of unfamiliar voices outside the caravan.

*We had entered a town…*

Before I could think to scream for help, one of the men hunched down on my level. "If you so much as squeak, I'll finish off your little friend myself," the man whispered, his foul breath crinkling my nose. "Don't move and stay quiet. Play nice and the bar rat will get to see a doctor."

My heart soared as I nodded mutely. Two men hoisted Camille up and carried her out of the caravan. The moment they stepped outside, a rush of murmurs and gasps resounded at the sight of Camille's limp form. I felt a rush of tension leave me as voices clustered around Camille. *She's safe.* Internally I still feared that the help had come too late, but I had done all I could. No sooner than the peace had filled me, it was stripped away at the sight of the prince climbing back into the wagon.

He approached me with an irritated glare. "Wish granted," he sneered. "Now who are you?" His shadowed eyes sent a fresh shiver down my spine.

"Kalina," I squeaked. "My name is Kalina. You'll get my last name after we have safely left this town." I held my breath. My threats felt far less intense now that I'd let my guard down.

The prince remained silent for a moment, but then summoned one of his men. "Return to the capital and search for any families with a missing daughter named Kalina. If you find one…" he looked me dead in the eye, "put an end to them."

I gulped, realizing the fate I had placed upon my stepfamily. With any luck, the man would only search the most influential families before coming across Sapphira. I had lied about my family being involved in the court, so that should protect them for a little while.

The prince turned his attention back to the man. "I'll send a messenger after you in a few hours with a last name, but for now, see what you can find." He flicked his eyes, the dark color glinting with

malice. “Well, Miss Kalina, are you ready for another trip?”

# chapter twenty-two

The Artisti property was far closer to the palace than I had realized. It didn't take long before our small fleet pulled up to the charming stone manor. It was a bit more rustic than most nobles cared to live, but from what Orion had told me, the head of the Aristi family was a widow. It was common to see such households living in more humble conditions since the support they received from the crown was intended to aid in caring for any remaining children. Madam Aristi had lost her husband when he still had three girls under the age of adulthood. Although despite that knowledge—and upon closer inspection—the grounds seemed to be a little more embellished than most. The front gardens were perfectly manicured and the spotless white shutters sparkled. There was no doubt that a large staff resided here, so perhaps they were left better off than most widows.

The entire family was already standing outside to greet us when we stepped onto the property. A middle-aged woman with tightly-pinned blonde hair stood between two young ladies, who were presumably her daughters. The woman maintained a noble smile and perfect posture the entire time it took us to dismount our horses. The two girls held cheerful expressions as well, but their smiles looked a little more feigned than their mother's smooth expression. The closer I got to the trio, the more I noticed that they were all obscenely overdressed for an unexpected visit. The mother wore a dark-blue gown that was fit for that of a much younger lady, though she wore it with esteemed grace. Her daughters each wore vibrant silk gowns with necklines that were cut slightly lower than what would be deemed appropriate for a lady of status. Their smiles all brightened as I knelt before them.

"Good afternoon, Madam Aristi," I greeted cordially. "I am here to address the report you have submitted to the guard. Is Miss Kalina here? I would like to speak with her in private before any further questioning." I stepped out of my kneel and noticed a slight twinge in the woman's over-powdered face.

"I am terribly sorry, Your Highness," the woman said with a flourished curtsey, "but I'm afraid my stepdaughter has gone missing. I last saw her fleeing on a stolen horse just after dawn. The girl must have known her days were numbered and took off at the first chance she received."

I nodded my understanding. That information lined up with the timing of Kalina's letter. Marlon had spotted her in the garden later in the morning, so it made sense that she left here after dawn. I just needed one final confirmation…

"What type of shoes was she wearing?" I asked plainly, looking closely at the ladies' reactions.

The two daughters both flinched in surprise for a moment, but their mother maintained her collected smile. "Her shoes?" The woman giggled delicately. "What does it matter what shoes she had on?" She waved her hand dismissively with another laugh, but I tightened my gaze on her.

"It is of the utmost importance, madam," I replied sternly. "The girl we are hunting for left extremely distinct footprints, and I shall need an accurate description of her shoes to confirm she is our suspect. Better yet, if you can bring me a pair of her shoes to compare them with, that would be most helpful. I'm certain your stepdaughter had plenty that she left behind, as any good noble should." I looked between the three faces and noticed a distinct shift of nerves flash over the daughters' expressions. I was curious to see what they brought me. It had always perplexed me that Dais—I mean, Kalina, had never worn shoes, so part of this investigation was to appeal to my personal interest.

The mother calmly looked to one of the girls. "You heard him, Brielle," she said sweetly. "Go

fetch the dancing slippers that belonged to Kalina."

The girl named Brielle gave her mother a puzzled look for a moment, then her eyes went wide with understanding. "Of course, Mother, I'll be just a moment," she replied, then turned to me to give a graceful curtsey. "Pardon me, Your Highness." Her lashes batted so wildly that I thought she may have had a speck of dust in them.

She disappeared into the house, leaving me with her overly-charming mother and sultry-eyed sister. The second daughter cast me a flirtatious smile. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness." Her voice was smooth as silk. "My name is Odelia. I was at the ball last night. I'm terribly sorry about your father, and even sorrier that we didn't get an opportunity to dance." She lowered her lashes and tucked her chin to her chest.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes as the mother placed a comforting hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Oh, darling, you cannot expect the prince to have danced with every young lady. I'm sure he had his reasons for choosing other partners before you, Odelia." The woman flicked a quick side glance at me while still soothing the girl.

*This is pathetic*… I had half a mind to inform the ladies that this was hardly the time for flirting, but I was saved as Miss Brielle came back out the front door at a noticeably slower pace, with a pair of silver slippers in her hand.

"Here they are, Your Highness." She smiled delicately as she passed me the slippers. "These belong to Kalina."

I took the simple shoes from her and turned them over in my hands a few times. *This is odd*… The girl I danced with last night was clearly barefooted, but these slippers showed signs of recent use. The soles were slightly worn and the toes had specks of dirt on them, but the rest of the shoe looked brand new. They were clearly used for only one night, but if that was the case… how had Kalina worn them?

My heart grew heavy as a suspicion struck me. *Had Daisy been lying? What if Kalina Aristi was another innocent, and the real Daisy was trying to push off the blame? There was no doubt these shoes had been worn, so if the real Kalina had worn shoes to the ball, then who hadn't?* My brain twisted into furrowed thought as the uneven pieces sloppily crashed together. Everything else had made sense up until this point… I turned the shoes over in my hand one final time, searching for any clue to aid me. As I turned my attention to the interior of the slipper, my eyes zeroed in on a small stain.

"Blood?" I spoke my thought out loud as I noticed the dark red stains in the heels, and toes of both shoes. "There are blood stains in these shoes, likely from blisters. Did Miss Kalina not receive the correct measurements when these were purchased?" I looked between the women, who all shared the same lost expression.

"It would seem so," the mother said with light-hearted surprise. "Kalina never told me that her shoes fit improperly, so I'm afraid I couldn't tell you for certain." She let out a small laugh that sounded more nervous than casual.

*Something is off*... I looked between the three ladies and noticed that the younger daughter, Brielle, seemed particularly pale. My mind flashed back to her slow walk from the manor. I turned my eyes to her. "Miss Brielle, would you mind removing your shoes for a moment?"

The girl's face instantly flushed red. "I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but wouldn't that be a bit indecent for me to stand before you without shoes?" Her words trembled a bit, and I noticed her mother's dazzling smile clench.

"There's no need to fear informality." I smiled reassuringly. "My men are not the type to spread

gossip, and it is a direct order from your prince. I simply need to silence a suspicion of mine."

Brielle looked nervously over to her mother, who looked pale now as well. Brielle leaned down to remove her shoes, but her mother slid smoothly in front of her. "Your Highness, don't you feel this is all a bit... over cautious. I can easily prove to you that Kalina was your father's killer. If you'll just follow me to the garden, then I'll—"

"Step aside," I commanded in a steel voice. She flinched back at my sudden directness, then reluctantly moved aside from her daughter. When she stepped away, my eyes fell to Brielle's now exposed feet. Her toes and heels were both bound in linen bandages, in the exact places the bloodstains had been located in the shoes.

My anger boiled as the lie unfurled before me. "These aren't Kalina shoes, are they?" I growled, raising the offending slippers. All my previous propriety had now completely dissolved. I didn't have time for pointless ruses.

"No, Your Highness, they were hers!" Brielle squeaked defensively. "I merely borrowed them, but I didn't realize they would be so tight on me." She looked down at her blistered feet.

"Then why did you bring them to me?" I seethed impatiently. "For what foolish reason did you decide to waste my time? Why not bring me a pair of her actual shoes when I requested them?" My eyes darted between the blustering women, and even their mother looked lost for an explanation. I was about to lose my temper with the deceitful family when a voice from behind them gained my attention.

"It's because she doesn't have any, Your Highness," an older woman projected from the side of the house. She stood by another well-aged woman and a young boy, who all appeared rather invested in the goings-on

The woman bowed. "My name is Yvette. My companions and I would be happy to tell you everything that the mistress has neglected to share."

My eyes widened when she spoke her name. Yvette was the name of one of the gardeners Kalina had referred to in her note. That must mean that the woman and boy beside her must be Beatrice and Chester. *Could Daisy have known the names of the gardening staff if she wasn't truly Kalina Aristi?* A feeling of relief brushed through me as I concluded that Kalina must have been telling the truth about her identity after all.

Yvette boldly stared down her mistress, earning herself a fuming glare from the distressed woman.

"This doesn't concern any garden trolls. Return to your work immediately, and we will discuss the penalty for your outburst later," the mistress scolded back toward her servants.

I stepped forward to stop her, but the second older woman, Beatrice I assume, beat me to it. "Now ya listen 'ere ya over-powdered hag!" Beatrice hustled forward, jeering a shovel in the woman's direction. Madam Aristi took a startled step backward and flashed me an imperiled look. I calmly ignored her frightened eyes, and instead tuned into the shouts of the shovel-armed woman. "Kalina has put up with enough of yer garbage, and I ain't about to let ya shoo off another person she cares about!" My heart leapt at the woman's words. *Did she just say that Kalina cares for me?* My thoughts were disrupted by a shriek from Madam Aristi as Beatrice forced her into a run to escape from her jousted shovel. "I shoulda done this years ago!" The gardener cackled a little sadistically.

The sight was so amusing, that part of me wanted to see what came next, but I wasn't here to be entertained. I signaled for the guard to restrain the older woman, and they did so with ease. Once my men had a firm grip on her, she politely complied to her containment, but continued to chuckle at the sight of her frazzled mistress. Madam Aristi turned beet-red with anger, but before she could make

any further moves, I signaled the guard to contain her as well.

"You are being detained for lying to the crown prince in regards to a matter of utmost severity," I said firmly to the ragged woman. "And you," I turned to the grinning Beatrice, "you and your companions will tell me everything you know, and I will also need you to direct me to Kalina's dress. Can you do that?" I looked over to where the other gardeners stood, and they approached me with relieved expressions.

Beatrice's smile broadened. "With pleasure, Your Highness."

The entire story took most of the afternoon to tell. The gardeners left out no details when it came to Kalina's mistreatment and Sapphira's misuse of the crown's support funds. My emotions flicked between anger and heart-wrenching sorrow as I slowly learned about Kalina Aristi's tragic life. She had lost both of her parents and was left with a merciless stepfamily who robbed her of everything. My throat tightened with a constricted scream as Chester passed me a handful of cracked leather pieces.

"These were her only shoes," the boy said softly. "She bought them herself, but the mistress destroyed them. So, to answer your earlier question, Kalina went to the ball barefooted."

I stared brokenly at the ruined leather and nodded mutely. "I know. She didn't wear shoes the first time we met, either." My voice came out quiet, hot anger burning my tongue. "I knew it was quirky, but I never imagined…"

"No one outside this house knew. Sapphira made darn well certain of that," Beatrice spat.

"Most of the staff was threatened to stay quiet," Yvette added. "We need our jobs just like anyone else does, so many of them even agreed to spy on Kalina for her. They all felt awful for it, but what else were they meant to do?"

"Thank you for bringing these events to my attention," I said coolly. "I guarantee that these crimes will be addressed and appropriately punished, but for now, I need to confirm that Kalina had no involvement in the king's murder." My heart seized as the thought of my father's absence resurfaced. "I understand that Kalina was in a bad situation, but that doesn't mean she didn't seek help from the wrong places. In her letter, she mentioned that her innocence could be proven by her dress. Do you know where it is?"

The three gardeners nodded in unison, and Chester bounced energetically. "I can show you right away!" the boy exclaimed. "Follow me, Your Highness!" Without turning back, the boy sprinted off across the grounds, and I was forced to jog behind him with the older women and the guard at my heels. When he finally stopped, he pointed toward a hollow opening in the base of a tree.

"Goodness, Chester," Beatrice huffed, "ya gotta warn us old folk before ya go runnin' off."

The boy merely shrugged off the woman's scold as I took a closer look at the tree. Wadded up against the roots, was the unmistakable lavender satin that had beautifully graced Kalina last night. The guard watched me curiously as I pulled the dress out from the tree and splayed it out against the ground. The dress was extremely heavy with the weight of the flowers, but most of the blooms were fully wilted and even beginning to dry along the edges of the petals. Once the dress was sprawled out against the ground, I began to inspect it with a closer eye.

"You said it was enchanted, correct?" I asked the group.

Yvette nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. She said she received it from a tavern maid in the capital. Once the dress was on her, none of us could recall her name or previous appearance." She looked over the dress with her own suspicious glare. "She didn't tell us what this evidence of hers was, so I can't be certain of what you're looking for."

I kneeled on the mossy ground, inspecting the stitched on blooms. "Was there anything about the dress that she mentioned to be significant? A secret message in the flowers or a hidden pocket perhaps?" I tried to mentally translate the meanings of the specific flowers she had attached, but it was such a wide variety that I couldn't see how a message would be intertwined.

"There is a pocket on the underside of the skirt," Beatrice noted. "We added it so she could carry her letter without it being seen."

I ran my hands along the edge of the skirt until my fingers felt the fold of the pocket. When I rummaged my hand through the opening, I found it was completely empty.

"No luck," I said dismally while laying the skirt back on the ground.

As I placed the satin back against the dirt, something caught my eye at the base of the dress. There was a small patch of fabric that was slightly off color. I stood from the ground and grabbed the top of the dress, flipping it around in the air so the back now faced upward. When I kneeled back along the hem, I could barely see where a different piece of fabric had been stitched into the skirt as a patch. A beautiful arrangement of now wilted flowers almost perfectly covered up what must have been a tear.

A quiet gasp escaped my lips as I rummaged through my pockets, grasping onto the strip of lavender silk I had stashed away. I laid the scrap against the hidden stitch, lining it up with the healed patch.

*It was a perfect match*.

My heart swelled with excitement as I stared at the evidence before me. "It matches! She's innocent!" I announced, my joy spilling over.

The members of my guard began to share intrigued murmurs with each other until Captain Orion stepped forward. "Your Highness," he said starkly. "I don't mean to spoil your relief, but I fear that if the fabric matches, then it only confirms that Miss Kalina was the one who broke into your father's office." The guard all seemed to agree with this sentiment as they looked upon me with pitied eyes.

"Quite the contrary, captain!" I laughed as I waved him to come closer and he followed. "Look here, the tear was already patched. How could Kalina have ripped her dress in the office if the fabric that tore was already missing? Not only that, but we can prove that the dress was mended before the ball. The flowers are all decayed at the same rate, meaning they were placed at the same time." I pointed at the seam that was barely visible beneath the wilted blooms. "By covering the seam with her flowers, Kalina essentially time-stamped the repair. If she had fixed the tear after the ball, then the flowers that now cover it wouldn't be wilted like the rest."

I watched with glee as the captain's furrowed brows raised into surprise. "Then this is clear evidence that the girl was framed. The dress scrap must have been intentionally removed beforehand in order to stash it in the king's office during the ball." The captain's face twisted into a disturbed expression. "This raises a new problem. If Kalina was framed, then where is she now? And where is the real group that planned the assassination?"

My joy shattered instantly at the captain's statement. Where *was* Kalina? According to the gardeners, she had gone to leave me a letter and to confront the tavern maid. That had to have been hours ago. She said in the letter that she would turn herself in, but that clearly hasn't happened yet. It was possible that she had decided to lay low due to the charges she was wanted for, but what if something had happened to her…

"Order all available troops to begin a hunt for Kalina Aristi," I commanded. "As long as my father's assailants remain unfound, she is in severe danger. I want every man we can spare searching

for her until she is safely by my side." I stared at the captain with the severity of a king.

He bowed. "Right away," he began to turn away then paused, redirecting his gaze on me, "Your Majesty." I felt a mixture of pride and sting as the captain made use of the kingly title. I was king now, and there was a very special citizen who needed my protection.

*Just hold on Kalina, we'll find you.*

# chapter twenty-three

"This is the place! Drag her out!" a rugged voice shouted from outside the caravan.

We had been traveling for two days, and the sun had begun to set. The wagon had abruptly pulled to a stop just before the man called out, and soon, I was being thrusted out of the wagon. My legs and wrists were stiff and numb from being bound for the last few days. We never stopped after we left Camille at the village. For two nights we had been traveling straight through, only stopping to gather water, relieve ourselves, and switch horses. The men ate occasionally in the back of the wagon, but I had only received one piece of stale bread per day and a cup of water. My bound limbs ached terribly from the awkward sleeping positions I had been forced to endure and my cheek still stung from the cut that was now healing over.

I had been expecting the prince to pull us over and at least ask me for the rest of my name, but he never did. Not once did any of the men seem interested in asking me any further questions. It was as if they already knew everything they needed to… I feared that his messenger had already figured out who I was and called my bluff, or that my step-family was easily found and already dealt with. A wave of nervous nausea rushed over me as I stumbled awkwardly out of the wagon. Once I was forced onto solid ground, I noticed that we were completely isolated.

The last day or so of the journey had been particularly bumpy, and now I could see that it was likely due to the fact that we hadn't been traveling on a proper road. We were completely surrounded by forest. It wasn't a particularly dense wood, since we had been able to fit a rather large caravan between the trees, but it certainly was desolate. If I had to guess, we were far enough away from any villages that crying for help wouldn't be an option. I looked up at the displeased prince.

His face was only half-lit by the setting sun, and it shadowed his eyes nefariously. "Good evening, Miss Aristi, I do hope your trip was pleasant." A twisted smile spanned his face, and I shivered. *My last name… He must have figured it out…*

"How did you discover my name?" I asked boldly, trying to minimize the fear in my voice.

A low laugh resounded in his throat. "Why, you're famous, my dear!" he said smoothly. "It would seem that the prince truly does care for you, after all. He sent out word for a kingdom-wide search for a Kalina Aristi. I suppose I under-estimated our little Daisy. Apparently, he has found some sort of proof of your innocence. So now, poor Kalina is known by the kingdom as the helpless victim." He pouted pitifully.

*So Jasper found the dress after all? He had actually read my letter and sought out my innocence?* A rush of relief and heartache ripped through me as I recognized the meaning of the dark prince's words. *Jasper had believed me, and now he had the entire kingdom looking for me… He wants to bring me home safe, but I fear that isn't going to be possible…*

"What do you want with me?" I asked, my heart heavy at the mention of Jasper. "You have had plenty of time to kill me, and now your plans to frame me have failed. What use could you possibly have for me now that the prince knows I'm innocent?"

The prince's eyes glinted with amusement. "I haven't quite made up my mind on that part yet… so I thought it might be fun to put it to a vote." He turned back to his men, who all smiled with humored nods. "You see, Miss Aristi, I now hold a very important piece in this game." He turned back to me and placed a cold finger under my chin. "You, the prince's beloved little flower girl."

I pulled my face away from his hand as quick as a viper. "So your plan is to hold me hostage? What in the realms for? You have already disposed of our king, what else could you possibly want

from Jasper?"

"Well… That's where I have options." The prince smiled slyly. "You see, Kalina, if you end up surviving this messy little operation, then I'm faced with the issue of you knowing I'm from Ashbourne." He tilted his head coyly and I rolled my eyes. "However, if the prince cares for you even half as much as he claims, I suppose I could barter your life for a peace treaty between our kingdoms." His men snickered in agreement.

A hot red rushed up my neck from a fresh burning anger. "A peace treaty!? After you just murdered Drancos's king!?"

"Well, that and a new trade agreement, of course." The prince shrugged casually. "Drancos truly does have the best soil. I'm sure Ashbourne could benefit greatly from some reduced trade laws. It's not as if Drancos's puny excuse for a military could handle our forces if a war should break loose."

My blood boiled inside me. *How dare he?! After all the turmoil and heartache he put this kingdom through? Now he thinks he can take advantage of a mourning son?* It was absolutely sick.

"Not a chance," I said boldly. "I won't let you use me to take advantage of this kingdom. Drancos deserves to take revenge on Ashbourne, and you and your men must face the consequences of the crimes you've committed." My hands tensed into fists. I wasn't going to be the reason Jasper had to form a treaty with his father's killer. King Garrett deserved justice.

"Well, that's too bad…" the prince tsked, "because the only other option is the one where you die." My face went white, and I noticed a small smile pull at the corner of the prince's lip. "Before I heard the prince was after you, I planned to leave you here in the woods. It would take at least four days to walk to the nearest town, and that's only if you know the direction it's in. I figured that if anyone ever found your body, they would just assume the murderous flower child got lost on her escape and perished from starvation. However, you've been deemed innocent now, but that doesn't have to ruin the fun, now does it? I could still leave you here and let my little secret die with you. Then, when I return home, my father can send his condolences, along with a few squadrons of soldiers to assist in the hunt for King Garrett's murderers. We'll likely have to find another poor chump to frame, but the results should be the same. Prince Jasper will have almost no choice but to accept an alliance after we've found the killers. It's a win-win situation for me, honestly, but one takes a little less time…" His dark eyes fell on me.

*So those are my options?* If I remain a hostage, I'll get to be with Jasper again… But he will forever have to live with the pain and grief of knowing who killed his father, yet never being capable of bringing them to justice. If I stayed in these woods, I would very likely die in a few days, and Jasper would still be deceived… But at least he would get a chance to be at peace with his father's death, right? My brain twisted and turned. None of these options were good. Either way they left Jasper in pain—either by losing the chance to avenge his father or by losing me. *Would losing me hurt him just as badly?*

My mind flicked back to the Ashbourne prince's words. Surely Jasper cared for me if he was willing to make the whole kingdom search for me. He loved me, and I loved him. It was hard to admit, but I wanted to be selfish and stay alive. If I remained a hostage then Ashbourne would win, but I would get to be with Jasper. Wouldn't that be enough?

My heart tensed and twisted as I calculated my options. An idea flicked into my mind, but my stomach twisted at the thought. There was one way that Ashbourne wouldn't win, but it was risky—and it wasn't a guaranteed victory. *Did I really dare? Would I survive?* Doubt flooded my brain as I considered the risks of my new plan. An image of Jasper's blue eyes and kind smile filled my mind, and my heart constricted at the thought of never seeing those eyes again. But I had to do this; I had to

be brave. It wasn't just for myself or for Jasper, but for Drancos as a whole.

*I can't let them get away with this.*

"Leave me," I said clearly, strength resonating behind my tone. "I wish to die in the forest as opposed to aiding you any further in your plans."

The prince raised an eyebrow, then narrowed his gaze "You would rather starve to death, cold and alone, than be returned safely to your beloved prince?" His voice oozed with skepticism.

I straightened. "Yes. I have been a pawn in your game long enough, and even if I survive to see Jasper again, I don't think I could live with myself knowing how much I've hurt him." My voice cracked a little, that part was a little too true. "If I die here, he will mourn me with his father, and I'll go down as a martyr. But if I live, the kingdom will despise me for putting Jasper in the position of allying with a kingdom ruled by monsters. Let me die here and be remembered as the innocent I am, and let Jasper at least gain a false peace that he avenged his father." I let out a tense breath, hoping that my reasonings were valid enough for the prince to believe them. The fear of being abandoned in this forest began to overwhelm me, but I pressed it down and stood as bravely as I could.

A smooth laugh rose out of the prince and he pulled out his sword. I flinched at the sight of the setting sun glinting off the steel. *He wasn't going to kill me now, was he? He said he would just turn me loose in the forest.* My heart rate increased as the prince closed the distance between us. I attempted to move back a step, but my bound ankles made it impossible to do so without falling. The blood drained from my face as the prince raised his sword in front of his chest. I bit my lip to keep a cry from slipping out.

*I'm sorry Jasper, I tried.* The blade flashed in front of me and I shut my eyes, bracing myself for the sting of death.

But no pain came… Instead, a sweet relief graced my ankles and wrists as blood flow returned to its natural pace. I opened my eyes and looked down to see the rope binding my feet and hands had been sliced clean through. I let out a sigh of relief as the prince snickered at my obvious fear.

"Alright, flower girl, I'll grant your wish." He smirked. "Diplomacy is always easier to maintain when it's not based on threats. Father will probably prefer a *willing* negotiation, anyway. He always liked to keep his shady elements hidden. And selfishly, I much prefer you dying alone than with a Draconian crown on that pretty little head of yours. This seems like an even trade for all the trouble you've caused me." He sheathed his sword before he turned back to his men. "Load up! We're crossing the border tonight. Arm yourselves and get moving." The men scattered, grabbing swords and helmets before climbing back aboard the caravan.

"Before you go…" I asked softly, "may I at least know your name?"

The prince whipped his attention back to me with a puzzled expression.

"I'm going to die anyway," I explained hastily. "May I at least know whose name to curse as I starve beneath the trees?" I tilted my head with a more humored light in my eye.

The man laughed. "Conan," he said in amusement as he bowed dramatically. "Prince Conan at your service, milady. Feel free to curse the name all you'd like." He stepped onto the back of the wagon, one foot still dangling off as it slowly pulled away. "You wouldn't be the first to do so." He winked before they disappeared into the darkness, leaving me to die.

# chapter twenty-four

The forest quickly grew dark. The looming trees cast eerie shadows across the ground. My body tensed at every sound, fearing a wild animal was lurking behind me on a hungry prowl. My bare feet brushed lightly against the forest floor, feeling the different textures in the dark. Most of the foliage I felt was moss, but occasionally my toes would brush by a tuft of grass. Each time I felt the soft blades, I adjusted my direction toward their growth.

Only a few times did I truly curse Prince Conan's name. Okay, maybe more than a few… I knew that staying with him would only secure his victory over Drancos; therefore, the only hope the kingdom had of avoiding his deceit was for me to break free and warn Jasper. The odds of surviving in the woods were not good, but they weren't entirely unlikely, either.

What Prince Conan didn't know was that my knowledge of plants extended beyond only flowers. My father had taught me a litany of botany skills and information that had already begun to aid me. With any luck, these skills could save my life. The sole of my foot stepped directly on another blade of grass, and I once again shifted my direction. A majority of the forest floor was made up of moss, which primarily grew in shade. Grass, on the other hand, required sun to grow, so by following the patches of grass, I was likely to reach a sunnier area of the forest.

A larger patch of grass, the size of my own foot, brushed against me. I breathed a smile of relief as the patches continued to grow larger and fuller. More sun meant more plants, and the more foliage I found, the better chance I had at foraging some food and gaining a sense of direction.

I continued walking until every one of my steps was met by the glorious soft blades. The moon was probably in the center of the sky by the time I finally laid down to sleep. My rest was entirely fitful, due to my growling stomach and the unsettling noises around me. I tossed and turned in the grassy patch until the sun drew my eyelids open. My eyes itched from lack of moisture as I blinked them awake. Now that the sun was out, I could see where my blind travels had led me.

The trees overhead were far sparser now, allowing golden beams of morning sun to shine through the thin leaves. The grass was thick and surrounded by other various shrubs and plants that sent whirling relief through me. My stomach growled with excitement as my eyes fell upon a bush that had sprigs heavy with berries. I would have run straight to it if my eyes hadn't first fallen on the small stream that lay beyond it.

I bypassed the bush entirely and ran to the clear water. My parched throat rejoiced at the sweet taste of the spring, and I instantly felt as though I could think clearer. My stomach growled once more, sloshing uncomfortably. I turned my attention back toward the berry bush, but this time, I inspected it more closely.

A frown spanned my face as I recognized the subtle differences between what I thought was a boysenberry and was instead a poisonous blue-night berry. My stomach gurgled once more, detesting against my brain's logic to stay away from the beautiful fruits. Turning away from the poisonous bush, I began to forage for other plants. With my mind slightly refreshed from its drink, I was able to identify and procure a collection of wild onions, edible mushrooms, and even a few walnuts. I munched on my bounty, feeling instantly rejuvenated. My spirits lifted, along with my energy, as I continued my walk, now following the stream.

As long as I kept my wits about me, I should be able to keep foraging for food. If I stayed near the water source, I wouldn't go thirsty, either. A loose rock poked at my foot, and I winced from the new bruise. *This would be so much easier with shoes*... I thought back to Sapphira and the girls and

wondered what they were doing, now that I had been declared innocent.

Knowing them, they likely put on a display of absolute sorrow, feigning how much they wanted me back and how they knew it was never me from the start. They would most certainly want to be in my good graces now that the prince himself wanted me found. I rolled my eyes at the thought of Sapphira ever shedding a tear for me, fake or real. If I ever made it back, I would be glad to fill Jasper in on Sapphira's true feelings toward me.

My heart fluttered as I once again felt my thoughts lingering on the handsome prince. Occasionally as I walked through the woods, I would find myself mimicking the dance steps that Jasper had led me through. That entire night had been both a fantasy and a nightmare. In some moments, I found myself wishing I had never left his side, but if I hadn't… Would I be here now? Would I have been permitted to escape or even get a chance to prove I was innocent? As much as I hated to admit it, the kingdom would have been worse off if I hadn't gone through all of this. Although, this would all be for naught if I couldn't make it out of this forest alive.

At the reminder of my need to survive, I caught sight of a fallen tree out of the corner of my eye. I stepped away from the stream and approached the rotted stump, inspecting the rings that circled the decomposing remains. The rings in the stump were far more spaced out on one side than the other. This indicated that the tree received the most sunshine on the far side of the tree as it grew. The trees above were sparser in that direction as well, meaning that the sun could let in more light. Therefore, the wider rings must be pointing east, the direction in which the most sun would be received due to its rising.

When my father used to leave on his trading routes, he would often speak of avoiding the western woods. It was an expansive forest that had no easy pass through. It was very likely that was where I was located now. We definitely never passed the border while we were in the caravan, so we were still in Drancos, and I didn't know of any other enlarged forests that a devious prince would rely on to starve an abandoned girl.

Using the tree rings as my new map, I directed my steps toward the east. If the forest was in the west of Drancos, then surely there would be some civilization to be found if I continued east—I just didn't have any clue on how far away they would be. My legs tensed for a moment as I began to move away from my water source. It was a risky thing to leave behind, but I had no guarantee that the stream would lead me outside the forest. Then again, I had no guarantee that a rotten log would do any better…

*I suppose there is only one way to find out.*

As I walked, I continued to collect every edible plant I could find. Despite feeling confident in my direction, the amount of full-sun plants were beginning to dwindle, and I was finding more moss and lichen than grass. I considered turning back the way I came, so I would at least be near water, but a second fallen tree confirmed that I was going east, and I journeyed on. As my second evening in the woods began to set upon me, I remembered something that had escaped my memory until now.

Today was my birthday. I was eighteen now, and officially free of my stepmother. This wasn't exactly how I envisioned the day to go, but it wasn't entirely far off. I was still alone, sleeping on the ground, and chasing a hopeless dream. However, the dream had evolved from being a business owner to simply surviving long enough to save the kingdom from our tyrannical neighbors, but that was only a small detail.

My feet began to grow heavy as moonlight replaced the sun's glow. My nose picked up on the scent of algae. I followed the earthy smell until I found a small pond surrounded by cattails. The water wasn't perfectly clear, so I only took a few small sips. It tasted fine enough, despite the algae

growing along the edges.

For the next four days, I continued along the eastern path, only stopping to rest and gather more food. The forest seemed to be endless. I was certain I had been traveling in the same direction, but the trees always looked the same. As much as I loved the outdoors, I found myself longing for a warm fire, and a hot meal, or at least a larger drink of water than a few cautious sips from a stagnant puddle. My body was beginning to grow weary from the light meals and heavy exertion.

As each day passed slower than the one before, it was starting to feel as though I was trapped in a prison instead of a forest. It was so tempting to stop, to pick out a cozy nook in the woods and build a shelter for a few days and simply rest, but each time I imagined making even a temporary home, my heart grew heavy. There were so many reasons why I couldn't stay here. I might be able to survive, but I wanted to live, and more than anything, there were people that I had to live for.

The sweet faces of Yvette and Beatrice filled my mind, followed by the giddy smiles of Corliss and Chester. On the days I truly felt like I couldn't go on, I remembered Jasper's shattered expression as he looked upon his fallen father. The pain that gripped him then was still with him now, and if I made it back to him, I might be able to help ease the hurt. Jasper deserved the truth, so my needs could wait.

I just needed out… If only I could get out…

My tired eyes lay in a bed of moss as I caved into the setting sun's demand for sleep. My stomach cramped from a less than sanitary drink of water I'd sipped earlier, and my head ached from my dwindling intake of food. My tired muscles sank into the soft ground, my feet in particular relishing in the relief of not being used. As tired as I felt, I couldn't sleep. It was partially from the bodily discomfort and partially from my spinning thoughts. Self-doubt began to creep into my mind as I stared into the tree canopy.

*Am I only kidding myself? Can I really make it out of these woods?*

My eyes stung, wanting to release a frustrated tear, but I blinked it back—I needed to conserve my moisture. The moon should have been only a slim crescent tonight, so I expected the forest to become nearly black. I allowed my eyes to remain open until the darkness forced me into sleep, but the pitch never fully arrived. It took me a minute to figure out what I was seeing.

*Light. I see light.*

The trees around me were still visible, but not with the silvery glow of the moon; instead, they had a warmer radiance to them. I sat up from my place of rest and darted my gaze across the trees, searching for the direction of the glow. When I looked behind me, I could see the distant light that shined through the forest. A soft orange glow radiated in the distance. It was not quite red enough to be a forest fire and not soft enough to be from anything natural.

I stumbled to my feet in a daze of disbelief, my aching body surging with new adrenaline. I pushed through the brush, entirely uncaring about the thorns and rocks I stepped on in the process. The closer I got to the light, the more I could see what made it. Lanterns, candles, and glowing windows lit up a small village in a heavenly light. My eyes welled up with tears as I pushed through the final shrub and broke free into the clear opening of the village's center.

A few individuals lingered outside their homes, hanging around what appeared to be a tavern. I gasped with elation at the sight of another human. My inhale and running feet drew the attention of a clustered group, and they approached me with worried eyes. My feet faltered right before I reached them, and I crumbled to the ground, bawling in relief. An older woman with a candlestick in her hand ran up alongside me and offered me a hand.

"Goodness child, are you alright?" she asked fretfully as she aided me to my feet.

A man swept up beside her, eyeing me with uncertainty. “What were you doing in the forest?” he questioned in a gruff tone. “Who are you?”

I took a few slow breaths to gather my composure. A few other onlookers had gathered, forming a loose circle around me. None of them knew what to make out of me, and I couldn’t blame them for being confused.

“My name is Kalina Aristi,” I projected for the whole crowd to hear, my voice cracking from its first real use in days. Many of their eyes widened at my name, and the woman who helped me placed a shocked hand over her mouth. “I need to get to Prince Jasper, immediately.”

# chapter twenty-five

"You found her!?" The words burst out of me as my heart swelled with relief.

"Yes, Your Majesty. She was found in the village of Arkam, in the western part of the kingdom," Captain Orion explained. "I have already sent my fastest troops to retrieve her safely."

Emotions clustered inside me as I let the captain's words wash over me. *She is alive…* "Do you know how she's doing? Was she unharmed? In good health?" The questions tumbled out of me, and I felt my chest seize with fear when the captain winced.

"She will be alright," he said ominously. I gave him a panicked look and he sighed. "Apparently, she had been wandering the western woods for quite some time. The report I received stated that she endured a few minor injuries and was malnourished. I'm afraid we don't know the full story on how she ended up in the middle of an endless forest, but the girl insists on only speaking to you."

A surge of anger pulsed through me. *What had they done to her?!* We had been searching for Kalina for over a week, and each night I had been lying in bed awake with the fear that she would never be found, or worse, that only her body would be found. To think she was left wandering in the woods all this time*? Had she been hiding there all along out of fear? Or had she escaped the men who dragged her into this mess in the first place?* The mystery of it all infuriated me. Kalina never deserved any of this.

In addition to searching for Kalina, I had been busy unraveling the crimes of her stepmother. Sapphira Aristi had successfully swindled Kalina's entire financial support after the death of her husband. The servants had informed me that the money wasn't the only thing withheld from her; she had been denied basic necessities, such as clothing, shoes, and even simple freedoms. The more I learned, the more I wanted to find Kalina. She had lost her father just like I had, but when he was gone, she was left with a family of monsters.

Once enough evidence had been collected to prove the Aristi family had been misusing the crown's funds, I sent the guard to place them under house arrest until further notice. All their staff had been dismissed with a full pension, so the Aristis should enjoy doing their own housework until an official trial can be held.

My blood still boiled at the thought of that horrid woman. She deserved a far worse punishment than scrubbing her own dishes, but I had needed to focus my efforts on finding Kalina. I needed her to be safe in my arms first, and soon, she would be.

After delivering his news, Captain Orion left my office, but was instantly replaced by another familiar face.

"Good morning, Your Majesty." Prunella, the housekeeper, bowed kindly.

"Good morning, madam. May I help you with anything?" I asked cordially. Prunella wasn't the type to approach me or Father directly, so it was a rare sight to see her in the office.

"Yes, Your Majesty." She stepped forward, lightly placing a thin stack of papers on my desk. "You see, despite the recent chaos, I have still been performing my duties in preparing for the anticipated wedding."

I stiffened at the reminder. With everything happening, I had completely forgotten about my need to wed. The ball had been an utter disaster, so no betrothals had been made. Although, if things had gone differently that evening…

"I'm sure the wedding is the last thing on your mind at the moment," the woman said knowingly, as if reading my mind. "But you see, Your Majesty, as I was going through some of the potential

applicants for the event, I came across a rather peculiar one…" She slid the top paper forward to me, and I quickly skimmed over the name.

Shock jolted through me as the name *Kalina Aristi* seared into my eyes. Instantly I recognized the name, but simultaneously, I noticed that it wasn't Kalina's handwriting. I snatched up the paper with heightened interest as I quickly read through the rest of the application. My face scrunched up with distaste as I suffered through the horrendous writing—every word was spelled incorrectly and the skills listed were ridiculous.

I looked up in confusion at Prunella. "What in the realms is this?" I snorted, waving the vile paper in the air. A memory flooded through me as I placed the paper back on the desk. Kalina's servants had mentioned something about an application… I looked back down at the paper and sighed. "Never mind, I know exactly what this is. Kalina's servants explained that her stepfamily tampered with her letter. It's no wonder the poor girl snuck into your office; she was likely trying to retrieve this monstrosity."

Prunella gave an agreeing nod before she slid the second paper to me. "I had a feeling it was falsified," she explained calmly. "This application was also in my stack. It would appear that Miss Aristi was partially successful during her sleuthing."

I picked up the second letter and was instantly surprised with a beautiful, dried bouquet in the center. The clean handwriting at the top of the note was a perfect match to Kalina's, and the crafted bouquet in front of me made it all too clear that this was how she truly wanted to represent herself.

"She's a talented girl," Prunella said softly. "If I had known the truth behind why she was in my office that night, I wouldn't have kicked her out. She's a very brave and determined young lady. Not many girls have the courage to take back what others have stolen from them. I know it isn't my place to say, Your Majesty, but she possesses a great many qualities that your mother, the late queen, did."

I looked up from the letter just in time to see Prunella complete her exiting curtsey. As she stood, a slight smile curled her lips before she turned to leave. A small laugh escaped me as I examined the beautiful, dried blooms in my palm. Warmth swam through me as my fingers gently traced the brittle petals. The soft fragrance of the flowers still remained despite their age, and I found the scent reminding me of Kalina at the ball. The fresh scent of flowers had been intoxicating and almost as beautiful as the girl who adorned them. I leaned back into my chair, inhaling the sweet scent once more.

"I couldn't agree more."

# chapter twenty-six

The carriage ride took two full days for me to return to the capital. I nervously chewed strands of my hair as we pulled in front of the grand palace. It didn't take long for the royal guard to fetch me after I made it to the Arkam village. Apparently, news of my endangered status had reached even the farthest ends of the kingdom. Once I told the villagers who I was, they instantly treated me with the most gracious care and alerted the nearest outpost they could find. Since then, I had been carted half-way across the kingdom by military carriages.

My injured cheek and feet had been well cared for and bandaged, and I had been given the most fattening meals they could muster. Everything seemed like it was going to be alright, but I couldn't shake the fear that loomed over me when it came to meeting Jasper.

I loved him; there was no doubt in my mind now. With each passing day I spent in isolation, I found myself desperately missing his soothing words and touch. Now that I was freed from my captors and the forest, I could finally see him again. This should have been an incredible feeling, but all I could feel was fear.

*What if he doesn't love me now?* So much had happened between now and the ball. I was certain he had loved me back then, but what if he changed his mind? He had seen my home, met my family, and seen how I lived. Had the hunt for me simply been due to my accidental involvement in the king's murder? I had wanted to believe that he wanted me found because he cared, but how could I be sure?

The doubts were all loosely based, except for one that dug deep into my brain. *What if he doesn't like the way I look?*

Ever since we first met, my true appearance had been shrouded, either by mud or magic. He had seemed so infatuated with me at the ball, but what had he truly seen? The dress had been beautiful, but what did he think about the girl inside of it? Had she been pretty? Average? Did she even have brown hair or eyes? My stomach twisted into knots as I was escorted out of the carriage. I wanted to see Jasper so badly, but I was terrified of him seeing the real me.

It would just be me—with no magic or filth to blind him. It would just be Kalina, the penniless, orphaned, low-ranked noble who loved him more dearly than she should probably be allowed.

As we approached the palace steps, I felt the memories flood over me of the first time I walked them. It felt like a lifetime ago that I had worn that dress and walked these stairs. Before we actually took any steps upward, the guard who was leading me took a sharp turn and began to lead me along the side of the stone walls instead. I followed him curiously, uncertain of our new destination. The longer I followed him, the clearer it became that I wasn't going to be meeting Jasper inside. We were going to the garden.

Butterflies twirled within me as my nerves overwhelmed my thoughts. When the guard pushed a small wooden gate open, I was led into a familiar spot. The sun glistened off the quaint pond, sparkling light onto the birch bench and wild flower patch. Standing in front of the blooms, with his back facing us, was a tall, blonde-haired man.

My heart fluttered to life as I instantly recognized Jasper. He turned slowly at the sound of our approaching footsteps. His eyes fell straight on me, and I felt my knees weakening at the blinding blue that held me in place. He was looking at me, the real me. My breath hitched in my throat as I stared at him dumbly.

He looked away from me for a brief moment to address his guard. "Leave us."

The guard gave a respectful bow, then disappeared back out of the gate, leaving me alone with the prince. His gentle eyes fell on me once more, and I felt my nerves heighten. *Well? What is he thinking?* My heart threatened to pound out of my chest as the prince slowly pulled a parchment out of his jacket. He unfurled the paper in front of me, then flicked me a glance before reading the paper aloud.

"Kalina Aristi," he read aloud. "Flower Designer, special skills including growing thorny weeds, occasionally being punctual… Oh! And my personal favorite, screeching like a dying bird upon request." His jesting smile lit up his whole expression as I felt my face turn as red as the roses beside me. He laughed softly. "It would seem that this Kalina has a great deal of talents…" He folded the paper and stepped forward, closing the space between us. "She can screech unworldly noises, design breathtaking bouquets, survive the wrath of a horrendous stepfamily, and escape the grasp of a dastardly foe."

He stopped just short of me, his gaze intense as if seeing me for the first time. "There are so many versions of you," he whispered. "Kalina, Daisy, the muddy maiden, all of them make up the most extraordinary girl." His hand brushed mine as he picked it up gently and held it in his own. A small gasp escaped my lips as he pressed a light kiss onto the top of my hand. "There's one other talent that I neglected to mention, one that has me enraptured more than any other." He lowered my hand, still holding it gingerly. "The ability to capture the hearts of those around you." My heart went wild as he looked at me with the most tender eyes. He was looking at the real me, and his gaze wasn't an ounce different than the one he gave me at the ball.

All the fear, stress, and tension melted away as I looked back at him. "I apologize for confusing you with so many faces," I whispered. "Allow me to try again." I dipped into a deep curtsey, still holding his hand. "My name is Kalina Aristi; I'm the daughter of a deceased merchant and a lover of flowers. I never meant to get involved with a band of murderers. I also never intended to wear a magical dress to the ball, nor did I mean to be framed for your father's murder." I stopped, worried that I was rambling.

I looked to Jasper with nervous eyes, wondering if I had struck a soft spot by bringing up his father's death, but he only laughed lightly at my babbling. "I understand. I had the *privilege* of meeting your stepfamily, and I can see how they would drive someone to desperate actions."

I let out a calming breath. "I'm sorry you had to go through that," I said with exaggerated sincerity.

He laughed once more, and I felt the comfort of his presence wash over me. I had done it. I was safe, and Jasper never had to be deceived by…

I gasped, recalling my desperate need to speak with Jasper in the first place. "Your Highness, I have something urgent to tell you." I tightened my grip on his hand, and he raised an eyebrow at me.

"Well, it must be important if you're using my title." He chuckled. "Jasper, will do just fine."

I ignored his witty reply and tightened my eyes on his. "Jasper, the men who killed your father had kidnapped me." I watched as the jest in his face disappeared and his hand gripped mine. "They wanted me to die in the forest so I couldn't tell you what I learned." I steadied myself, gripping Jasper's serious expression with my own. "It was Prince Conan from Ashbourne. He killed your father and wanted to blame it on me. Well, first he wanted to blame it on a barmaid, then on me, and now on a random Draconian. Also, there's an injured barmaid located somewhere in the west who can tell you more."

Jasper's face distorted between severity and confusion. "Pardon?"

Wordlessly, I led him to the bench. Once we were seated, I explained the entire story in full

detail. He only stopped me a few times to ask the occasional question, but mostly waited patiently until I finished.

His face grew grim. "So King Darius thinks he can dispose of my father without anyone being the wiser?" he said coldly. "That's repulsive."

I placed a soothing hand on his. "I'm so sorry, Jasper. I wish I could have done more to stop them, but they were too clever." My heart sank at the memories of the collective group.

Jasper took my hand into his. "Don't apologize. I would have been in the dark if you hadn't escaped. You protected the entire kingdom. Now I can get justice for my father. He deserved that much…" His tone grew solemn.

"What will you do now? Are you going to confront Ashbourne?"

He paused for a moment in deep thought. "No, not yet," he said firmly, standing from the bench. "Right now, Ashbourne doesn't think we're onto them. I want them to relax and think they've won, and I intend to keep it that way until we have a proper plan."

"That makes sense," I agreed, looking up at him. "How do you intend on convincing Ashbourne that you're unsuspecting?"

A mischievous smile flicked at the corner of Jasper's mouth as he turned to the patch of flowers. I watched him curiously as he retrieved what appeared to be a small package and an unseen bloom from the flowers, meticulously keeping it out of my sight. I attempted to peek behind him, but he swayed so I couldn't see.

He grinned, still holding the package behind him. "I'm going to throw a party."

I crossed my arms, still flustered at what he was hiding from me. "A party? How will that help anything?"

He stepped forward, his grin softening. "It will showcase the strength of our kingdom and put Prince Conan on high alert. He believes you perished in the forest, so how do you think he'll react when you're flaunted in front of the entire kingdom?"

My mouth fell open at his implication. "You want me to attend a royal party? Do you remember what happened the last time I came to a ball? It wasn't very enjoyable for anyone."

"Oh, I remember." His smile brightened as he stepped forward, moving closer to where I sat on the bench. "You stole every eye in the room with your beautiful entrance, and I can only imagine that you would steal the heart of the entire kingdom at an even grander celebration. Although this time, I think you'll need a little something extra to complete your ensemble." He moved the hidden package in front of him, still keeping the mystery flower he plucked out of sight. I watched with perplexed thoughts as Jasper opened the package and removed its contents.

I sucked in an awestruck breath as he produced the most beautiful leather boots I had ever seen. The soft brown leather only moved up to the height of an ankle, allowing the shoe to be practical for both interior and exterior use, and the design… My mouth fell agape as I looked upon the beautiful ivy pattern that trimmed the shoes, with a perfect daisy bloomed at the top of the toe.

Jasper smiled brightly as he watched my astonished expression unfold. "Your gardener friends knew a rather remarkable cobbler who already had your measurements," he explained. "I figured it was the least I could do for you, after everything you've been through… May I?" He gestured to my uncovered feet.

I nodded mutely. My heart was still racing with joy from his sweet gesture, so much so that I was glad I had remained seated. Jasper knelt onto the ground and slid the boot onto my bandaged foot with ease.

"It's a perfect fit," he acknowledged, his smile reflecting my own.

"They're incredible. I don't know how to thank you." I stood from the bench to test the new boots, and instantly relished in their comfort and warmth. My eyes misted with heartfelt tears as I stared into the eyes of the man who had known just what I needed.

"You're almost ready for the party now," he said with a light tease to his tone. "There's only one more thing I wanted to address… You see, we'll need to hire a few extra hands for a celebration as grand as this. But the issue is, I believe you applied for a position at this specific event. Although, I can't give you the job… I think your opinions and designs should be given the highest priority." His words were tender as he slowly pulled the flower he'd been hiding into view.

*A blood red rose.*

My heart fluttered at the sight of the vibrant red. My head tried to consider any alternate meanings for the flower, but there were only two that I had ever known. *Is this real? Is he really telling me…*

"I love you, Kalina." He voiced the flower's meaning as I looked up into his loving gaze. "Will you marry me?"

Joy swept through me as I pulled him into a tight embrace. My heart pounded in my chest as I pulled back to look into his smiling face, his lips only inches from mine.

"Is there a flower that means yes?" I whispered.

His face lit up in elation as he pulled me into a blissful kiss.

# epilogue

"I'm sorry, Father." Prince Conan kneeled at the base of the king's jeweled throne, his eyes trained to the floor. "I should have disposed of the girl myself. I am solely to blame."

The king peered down at his son with scornful eyes. "Is this how you get your blade dirty?" the king sneered. "You managed to put down a foolish old man, but you spare a measly child? I thought you had more spine than that."

Prince Conan tensed. "Forgive me, Father, I was too greedy. I wanted the girl to die a more painful death than my blade could bring her. I never imagined she would survive, or become the Dranco's queen, for that matter." His teeth gritted as he spoke of the girl.

"Typical." A prude laugh emitted from his father. "Fortunately, I knew your arrogance would lead to this outcome."

The prince looked up at his father with puzzled eyes. "How could you have known?"

The king tilted his chin up, glaring down at his eldest son. "I have my ways…" he said belittlingly. "Perhaps if you earn my favor, I'll show you my tricks."

The prince rose fully to his feet, glaring ice at his father. "Have I not already earned your favor?" he growled. "Did I not slay a king for you? I may have muddied Ashbourne's name in the process, but doesn't that only showcase our strength? Those with power aren't suited for hiding in the shadows."

"Silence," the king commanded sternly. The prince went quiet, but his dark eyes continued to pierce through his father. The king stiffened in his throne. "You speak too much. I am indeed pleased with your work. I would not have sent you if I didn't wish for these events to unfold."

The prince frowned. "If you're pleased with my work, then why not announce me as your successor?"

The king smirked. "Now, now, Conan, have a little patience… You and Miron have both had a chance to prove yourselves, but what about my dear second eldest?"

The prince stepped forward with clenched fists. "Killian!? You cannot be serious, Father. That weakling could never be king! I am your firstborn and have already proven myself. Why waste your time testing the fool!?"

The king quieted his roars with a steel glare. "You once said the same of Miron," he hissed. "Being born first bears no weight with me. My kingdom shall only be ruled by the strongest. You have proven to me that you'll do what is necessary, but I think your respect could use a little improvement."

"I refuse to respect those beneath me."

"Then you had better be certain they are beneath you." His tone could have crippled a warrior as he bore his dark glare into his son. Without another word, the king waved a hand at his son and dismissed him, leaving the king alone in the expansive room.

With another wave, he summoned a servant. He tapped his ringed fingers against the throne's arm as the servant scurried in front of him and bowed low.

"Send in Prince Killian."

The dress fit beautifully. Today was a day that the entire kingdom would celebrate, the day that I married the newly crowned king of Drancos. Affectionate warmth filled me at the realization that I would soon become Jasper's bride. My brown eyes beamed back at me in the mirror with my elation.

The wedding gown I adorned was nothing short of astonishing. Pure white silk hugged my torso before splaying out into a full skirt at my waist. The palace seamstresses had done a beautiful job embroidering the hem and bodice. All along the base of the skirt were delicate embroidered flowers, each one as vividly stunning as its live inspiration. My bodice and sleeves also contained a few flower stitchings, with a perfect white daisy crested in the center. It was everything I could have hoped for and more. I turned around in the mirror as my entourage awed in unison.

"You're breathtaking, Kalina," Yvette sobbed through puffy eyes. "You look just like your mother did at your age, but with your father's eyes."

My heart melted at the woman's joyful cries, and I stepped away from the mirror to embrace her tenderly. Beatrice sniffed behind me, and for a moment, I thought I noticed a gloss in her eyes as well.

"You make a beautiful bride," she said through choked words. "Your parents would have been so proud." I could tell she was trying to withhold any waterworks, but a single tear slid down her cheek, and I wrapped her in the hug as well.

"I wish they could be here today," I whispered to the women. "But I'm so thankful to have you both here in their place. I owe the world to you two. Thank you for being there for me when no one else was."

Their embrace tightened as a soft knock sounded on the suite's door. As I looked up, I saw two more cheery faces smiling back at me.

"What are we? Chopped liver?" Chester pouted with a slight grin tugging at his mouth.

"Face it, Chester," Corliss added while shaking his head, "the ladies outdid us in the mothering department."

I laughed at the two boys, then waved at them to join us. "I'm thankful for both of you, too. Now get over here and hug me!"

The boys ran over, but Chester stayed back a step, holding a small box in his hands. I looked over at him curiously as he lingered behind our cluster with a cheeky grin.

"What do you have there, Chester?" I inquired, looking down at the box he gripped.

"Oh, this?" He raised the box up toward his smile. "It's just a little wedding gift I threw together… Would you like to see it?"

Before I could even answer, he began to pull the top off the box. I laughed at his giddiness, then sucked in a breath when I saw what the box contained.

"Chester, are these...?" I lightly touched a hand to my mouth as my eyes misted over.

"They're your mother's roses," the boy confirmed as he pulled out the beautiful flower crown. "After Sapphira uprooted the bush, I repotted it and have been tending to it ever since. Your betrothed introduced me to a couple of casters who worked in the palace gardens. They helped it bloom in time for the big day." His bright eyes illuminated with excitement as he lifted the pink blooms out of the box. "May I?"

I nodded, still pressing a hand to my mouth. "Please." I swallowed back my joyful tears as Chester gently placed the crown of roses upon my head.

"If you ever want to see the bush again, it's in the palace garden," Chester smiled, "in your favorite spot, of course."

Wordlessly, I pulled the boy into a hug, and he embraced me fully. Not even Sapphira had been able to destroy my parents' memory. My heart overflowed with joy and relief at the thought of being able to look upon my family's blooms once more.

After Jasper and I became engaged, I was able to confirm all my step-family's mistreatment. As punishment for their crimes, the entire family estate and fortune was given to me, and all three of them

were stripped of their titles. Now that I was becoming a queen, I had no use for my inheritance, so I gifted the house to the servants and donated most of the money to a newly flourishing tavern. I didn't want to leave Sapphira and the girls homeless, however, so I offered them jobs at the palace. My once prudish stepfamily now spent their days fertilizing the palace gardens with only the freshest manure.

Once I was safely in the capital, Jasper sent out the guard to fetch Camille. She was in rough shape but has healed up nicely over the past month. Jasper pardoned her from any involvement with the Ashbourne assassins, and she and her mother were getting along rather well now. We had actually become good friends since the incident and wrote to each other regularly. In fact, I was expecting to see her at the wedding today.

For two weeks, the kingdom mourned the loss of King Garrett. There had been a beautiful memorial service held amongst the palace gardens, and even the king and queen of Isalla joined us to express their condolences. Queen Arabella and I spent a great deal of time together reminiscing about our time with the kind ruler. She greatly enjoyed my company since her pregnancy kept her from being too active. She and I had also become quick friends, but she was unable to attend the wedding since her delivery could be any day now. However, they did still send us a lovely gift of a dozen apple tree saplings to add to the palace grounds. They made a beautiful addition to the public section of the garden.

Everything had fallen perfectly into place. The only unresolved issue left was Ashbourne…

As soon as news spread beyond Drancos that King Jasper had chosen a bride, Ashbourne went silent. Our wedding was a display of our knowledge of their misdeeds, and instead of attempting to negotiate a peace, they cut themselves off entirely. The kingdom of Isalla has been allied with Ashbourne longer than Drancos, but after they received word of King Garrett's assassination, they sided with our kingdom. I don't know much about the world of politics, but I know enough to acknowledge that a war is brewing. If Ashbourne doesn't start confessing any crimes, we'll likely be taking the issue to their borders. A small shiver ran down my spine at the thought, but I shook it off. There would be a time and place to worry about such details, but today wasn't that day.

"It's time, Kalina!" Yvette chimed into my thoughts.

Smiles surrounded me as they led me toward the doors. My excitement sent nervous trembles through me as I was escorted through the palace halls. Each servant I passed beamed the sweetest smile as they looked upon their future queen. Nerves trickled through me as I realized that with each step I took, I was one step closer to ruling a kingdom, but even better, marrying my true love.

As we stepped outside, I instantly noticed the perfect blue sky. It was the most beautiful day for a garden wedding, and I couldn't be happier with how everything turned out. Arrangements of roses and lilies lined the pathways, filling the palace grounds with their sweet scents. Once I was close enough to the clearing where the ceremony was occurring, my entourage split off from me to take their seats. I stood alone at the back of the aisle, a beautiful hedge of azaleas standing between me and my new role as a wife and queen.

My toes wiggled happily inside my soft leather boots. Despite owning more shoes than I could ever count now, I had still chosen to wear Jasper's gift for the wedding. No shoe could compare to the boots that my soon-to-be husband had chosen, plus they were far too comfortable. They may not have been grand bejeweled slippers, but that was what I liked about them. They reminded me of where I came from. Today I might become a queen, but I always wish to stay grounded to who I once was—the girl who loved her family, adored the outdoors, and took chances to be brave, even when it wasn't wise.

My smile gripped my face as Prunella signaled for me around the side of the topiary. “We’re ready for you, Your Majesty.” The older woman said the title with a wink, and I felt my chest seize with nerves and elation.

With a shaky step, I walked around the azaleas and looked across the sea of people. So many eyes turned upon me, each one full of wonder and awe. My cheeks grew pink at their gawking glares, and I felt a rush of déjà vu from when I had entered the ballroom in my fresh floral gown. My heart began to pound as I felt the pressure of the eyes around me. Before my nerves could halt my steps, I looked forward…

*There he is…*

At the end of the aisle stood Jasper, his eyes wide with astonishment. A heartfelt smile crept up his face as we caught each other’s eyes, and I felt all my nerves vanish. I crossed the aisle in slow motion, letting the soft music lull my steps to the man who held my heart. As his blue eyes grew nearer, I felt my smile grow brighter. When I reached the end of the aisle, his gaze held onto me as if I were the treasure he had been searching for his whole life. He took my hands, and we started our own new beginnings.

Together, we began our happily ever after.

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